DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 197 FL 023 404

AUTHOR Meara, Paul
TITLE Student Attitudes to Learning Modern Languages in the 1980s. Data from Nuffield Modern Languages Inquiry, 1986. Occasional Papers, 36.
INSTITUTION Southampton Univ. (England). Centre for Language Education.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 87p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; College Students; Course Content; *Educational Needs; Educational Strategies; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Knowledge Level; Language Attitudes; *Modern Languages; National Surveys; *Relevance (Education); Scheduling; Second Language Instruction; Second Languages; *Student Attitudes; Time Factors (Learning)
IDENTIFIERS United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Results of a survey of college and university students of modern languages in Great Britain are presented in three separate reports. The first concerns current classroom practice in language teaching, including how students spend their time on language-related activities (e.g., attending lectures in a foreign language, doing translations, using a computer or language laboratory) within and outside language classes. A wide range of responses was received, suggesting little clear pattern. Students were also asked which activities they found most useful and enjoyable. The second report presents student attitudes about what skills language graduates should have (e.g., converse with near-native fluency, pick up topical or cultural allusions, read specialist material), and how they themselves meet those criteria. Results indicate a low level of agreement about needed skills and a high level of students complacency about their own language capabilities. Few saw literature or linguistics as features of an ideal modern language program. The third reports addresses the content and perceived value of a year of study abroad, including how the study period was arranged, how it was spent, patterns of foreign language use, cultural knowledge gained, and other personal benefit. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 389 197

University of Southampton

CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

OCCASIONAL PAPERS, 36

STUDENT ATTITUDES TO LEARNING MODERN LANGUAGES IN THE 1980s

DATA FROM NUFFIELD MODERN LANGUAGES INQUIRY, 1986

PAUL MEARA

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

MARCH 1995

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FL023404

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The Nuffield Modern Languages Inquiry was a substantial investigation of modern languages in higher education in Britain in the mid-1980s. Unfortunately, no immediate reports emerged, but six years after the data was collected, Dr Paul Meara, of the Centre for Applied Language Studies, University College, Swansea, obtained access to some of the material and published a group of reports in the *Language Learning Journal*, the journal of the Association for Language Learning.

The material was extremely interesting to the Southampton Centre for Language in Education because of its commitment to research in all aspects of language education, and we thought it would be worthwhile to bring the papers together into one report, as originally prepared by Paul Meara at Swansea, under the title (which we have modified slightly for this Occasional Paper by adding "modern") Student Attitudes to Learning Languages in the 1980s.

The journal publication details are as follows:

"What do students do on a language course?" *Language Learning Journal* 8, September 1993: 26-31

"What should language graduates be able to do?" *Language Learning Journal* 9, March 1994: 36-40

"The year abroad and its effects", *Language Learning Journal* 10, September 1994: 32-38.

We are most grateful to Dr Meara, to Dr Colin Wringe, the editor of the journal, and to the Association for Language Learning, for permission to reproduce the papers.

Contents

Introduction

Acknowledgements

Report 1: What do students do on a language course?

Report 2: What should language graduates be able to do?

Report 3: The year abroad and its effects

Appendix

acknowledgements

A large number of people have contributed to this report:

Miss Shiela Browne kindly took me through the raw data in Cambridge, and provided copies of the preliminary analyses made at Cambridge.

Ahmet Kosun provided invaluable help with the computer files.

Walter Grauberg, Philip Thody, Brian Page, Sam Spicer, Tony Harding and Peter Dyson read copies of the preliminary drafts of this report, and provided extensive comments and suggestions. I am particularly grateful for the unpublished material they made available to me, and for the insights they provided into the way the Nuffield Inquiry steering committee was thinking.

introduction

This report is based on data collected as part of the Nuffield Modern Languages Inquiry.

Although the Inquiry was set up in 1985, and the bulk of the data was collected in 1986, no published reports based on the data have appeared. In 1991 I was asked by Robert Hazell to take a preliminary look at the raw data with a view to producing a short series of publishable reports.

The central part of the Inquiry consisted of a very large questionnaire which was administered to a representative sample of modern language students in higher education establishments in Great Britain. The replies to this questionnaire had been coded in machine readable format, and I was eventually able to use this data as the basis for the three reports presented here.

These reports by no means exhaust the data collected as part of the Inquiry. Indeed, they do not even exhaust the information avaialble from the questionnaire. My own interests lie in the area of student attitudes and the proficiencies that students demonstrate, and these angles are the ones that I have pursued here. It would also have been possible to investigate other interesting angles: the differences between universities and public sector institutions, for instance, or the differences between students who are mainly interested in languages, and those who see languages primarily as an enabling skill, and so on. Questions like these can be asked of the data, and I hope that others will do so. My main purpose has been to bring a small part of this data to a much wider public than it has previously enjoyed.

Although much of this data has not been released until now, Professor Philip Thody published an article in the Times Higher Education Supplement which was based on a preliminary version of one of these reports. I have included Thody's article as an appendix to this report.

Paul Meara

What do students do on a language course?

It has become something of a common-place among language teachers that the past 10 years or so has seen a dramatic change in the way we teach languages. "Old-fashioned" methods that emphasised grammar and translation have been replaced by a more up-to-date communicative approach, emphasising active command of the language, especially speaking and listening skills. There is also a widespread belief that modern language teaching at tertiary level still lags behind the revolution that has taken place in secondary schools, despite the fact that many institutions have made a point of developing their modern language teaching.

The traditional image of modern language teaching is described in Healey (1967), a book published just as the "revolution" was getting under way. Healey comments that it is difficult to come up with hard and fast figures for current practice, because it varies so much from one institution to another. However, the general picture which he paints is one in which the main instrument of language teaching is the translation class, formal grammar, and the study of literature, with a heavy emphasis on written work. A large part of Healey's book is devoted to ways in which these traditional, well-tried methodologies can be improved. The final part of his discussion is concerned principally with the development of language centres, and the way that these new Centres are likely to impact on traditional teaching. In particular, Healey suggests that language laboratories and their attendant technology are likely to change the teaching of languages.

The official history of the development of these centres has been described in Grauberg (1990). In many revolutions, however, the official histories provide descriptions at a level which is rather remote from the experience of ordinary people. High level changes can look very impressive on paper, while leaving things very much as they always were on the ground. It is possible to get some idea of the way things have changed by comparing current course prospectus with a prospectus from earlier years, but these comparisons are not really very reliable. Languages are certainly taught in a wider range of options than they were twenty years ago - with a particularly significant increase in the availabilty of language and business courses. New course books have certainly become available, new technologies have developed. Most language teachers subscribe to communicative objectives. But have these changes made a real difference to the way languages are learned, or is it just a case of describing old, familiar things in a new terminology?

My own experience of learning modern languages in Cambridge in the 1960s will no doubt be typical of the experience of many readers of this report. I studied two languages, French and Spanish. The formal language teaching consisted of two

one-hour translation classes for each language: one class dealt with translation from English, the other with translation into English from the foreign language. There were no oral classes, though there was an optional class run by a native speaker, which was thinly attended. It was generally assumed that you knew the language before you arrived, an assumption that found its expression in the way language proficiency was assessed: Cambridge operated a system whereby you sat an oral examination in the week before you started your course. Almost all lectures (eight or so a week) were given in English, and were principally concerned with literature - the Spanish department had just introduced a lecture course on Spanish history, but this was generally considered to be a dangerous innovation. We read a lot, mostly in the foreign language, though much of the literary critical background we read in English. And we wrote extensive essays on literary topics; except for a small number of general "essays" in the foreign language, all this written work would be in English. Looking back it all sounds pretty dire. Nonetheless, and despite all the obvious criticisms, it turned out to be a surprisingly effective way of learning a language - though I suspect that a large part of the real language learning took place during the long vacations in France and Spain.

How far has current practice changed? Surprisingly, it is very difficult to get hold of figures which actually tell us what students do when they study languages. A number of instances of "good practice" are discussed in a 1989 HMI report, and this report suggests that there is a great deal of innovative and very imaginative teaching around. The report only discusses isolated cases, however, and, despite its title, does not attempt to provide a proper generalised account of current practice. The only recent questionnaire I have been able to locate is Sewell (1989), a small-scale study of departments of French in the UK. However, this survey was aimed at departmental practice, and does not appear to have asked the students themselves what they did.

Fortunately, there is one available source which can throw some light on how far Healey's projections have actually come about. This source is the Nuffield Modern Languages Inquiry, which was begun in 1985. The Inquiry was a large-scale study of what was the current practice in British Higher Education. A key element of the enquiry was a questionnaire addressed to a structured sample sample of undergraduates reading modern languages. The questionnaire asked for information about their experiences in their language courses, their expectations and their attitudes to perceived outcomes. The questionnaire was extremely large - some 24 pages in length. The number of respondents and the nature of the sample makes the data recorded by the questionnaire a uniquely representative source of information. It is possible to use this data to draw a very accurate picture of what things were really like at the time of the survey - or at least how they were perceived at the time by the undergraduate population.

The Nuffield Student's Questionnaire (NSQ) was filled in by 586 students who were studying modern languages as part of their degree course in 1986. Unlike most studies of this sort, which tend to rely on random, or unstructured samples from the target population, NSQ used a carefully constructed sample which reflected the population of undergraduates at the time. 361 of the sample were females, and the remaining 225 were men. 61% of the sample were studying French as one of their languages, 42% German, 21% Spanish, 10% Italian, 9% Russian, 5% Chinese, 5% Arabic, and smaller numbers were studying 25 other languages from Swedish to Swahili. (The percentages do not sum to 100 because some respondents were doing more than one language.) 77% of the sample were studying at universities; 23% at public sector institutions.

The data reported here is only a tiny part of the whole survey. It is concerned with a part of Section 2 of the questionnaire, which asked a series of questions about how these students spent their time during term. These questions are reproduced in Table 1 below.

Table 1 NSQ question 12 and 13.

12: Please indicate the approximate number of hours per week you are spending this term on your studies, both contact hours and private study.

(a) total time studying [ ]
(b) related to foreign language [ ]

13: Now fill in the typical number of hours per week that you are spending this term on the following foreign language related activities. The figures need not add up to the total you have given, as we know that some activities overlap.

a) attending language classes [ ]
b) attending lectures in a foreign language [ ]
c) attending lectures in English [ ]
d) using language laboratories [ ]
e) reading in a foreign language [ ]
f) reading in English [ ]
g) doing translations from a foreign language [ ]
h) doing translations into a foreign language [ ]
i) writing in a foreign language [ ]
j) writing in English [ ]
k) doing grammatical exercises [ ]
l) talking in L2 with a native speaker [ ]
m) doing language work on a computer [ ]

The replies to question 12(a) are shown in Figure 1. The average time spent on language related activities was 26 hours, but there was a very large amount of variation around this average figure. Respondents who were studying two languages not surprisingly spent more time in this area than students who were doing joint courses in a language and another subject, and this accounts for the two peaks in the graph at 15-16 hours and 36-40 hours.

How was this time spent? Not many hours were spent attending language classes. Figure 2 shows that just over 58% of the 586 respondents claimed to five or fewer hours a week of language classes. Only 8% of the sample spent more than 10 hours per week in language classes. These figures are a little difficult to interpret because the question overlaps to some exient with later ones. It is not clear whether the respondents interpreted the question to mean *formal language classes*, or *language-related classes*, and it is possible that this confusion may account for some of the variation in the responses to this question.

This ambiguity does not apply to Figs three and four, however, which show the number of hours the respondents spent attending lectures in their Foreign Language and in English respectively. The striking thing here, of course, is the very large number of respondents who never attend a lecture in their foreign language. 42% of the sample fell into this category, and a further 9% attended only 1 lecture each week in the foreign language. This means that more than half the sample attend 1 or 0 lectures in their L2 in a week. On the other hand, a substantial minority of respondents (17%) attended more than five such classes. The corresponding proportions for lectures in English are very different: only 24% of the sample attended 1 lecture or less in a week, while 45% atended more than 5 English language lectures. (See figures 3 and 4.)

Technological developments seem to have had much less of an impact than one would have expected them to have. In the 1970s, language laboratories were considered to be at the leading edge of language technology, and a number of university departments installed large language laboratory complexes to help improve the quality of language teaching. This revolution appears to have by-passed the students in the Nuffield Inquiry. Just under half the respondents spent no time at all in the language laboratory. Just over a quarter (27%) spent one hour a week in a laboratory, and only a handful of respondents spent more than four hours working in this way. It is possible, by the time the questionnaire was administered, that language laboratories were already beginning to be regarded as "old hat", and were already being replaced by more advanced technology, particularly computers. The Nuffield data does not offer any evidence to support this interpretation, however. Only 26 individuals reported that they spent any time at all working with a computer, a mere 4% of the total. (See figure 5.)

Figure 1

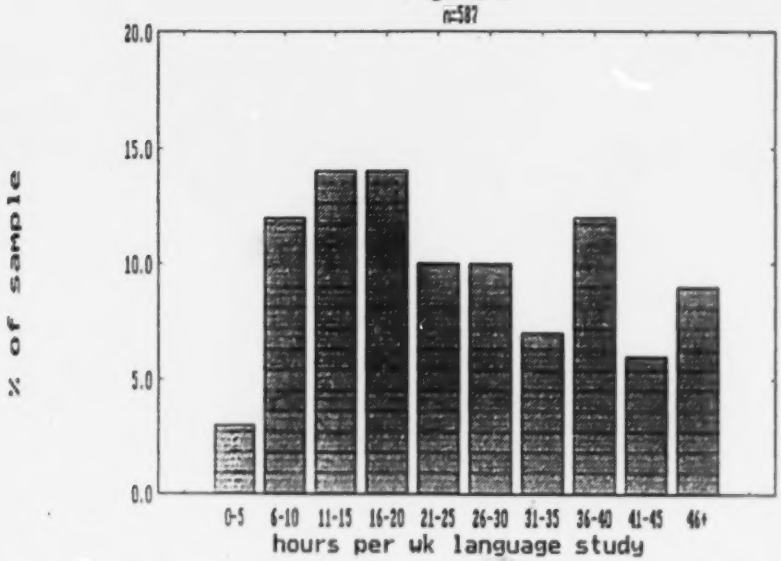

n=587
20.0
15.0
10.0
5.0
0.0
% of sample
0-5
6-10
11-15
16-20
21-25
26-30
31-35
36-40
41-45
46+
hours per wk language study

Figure 2

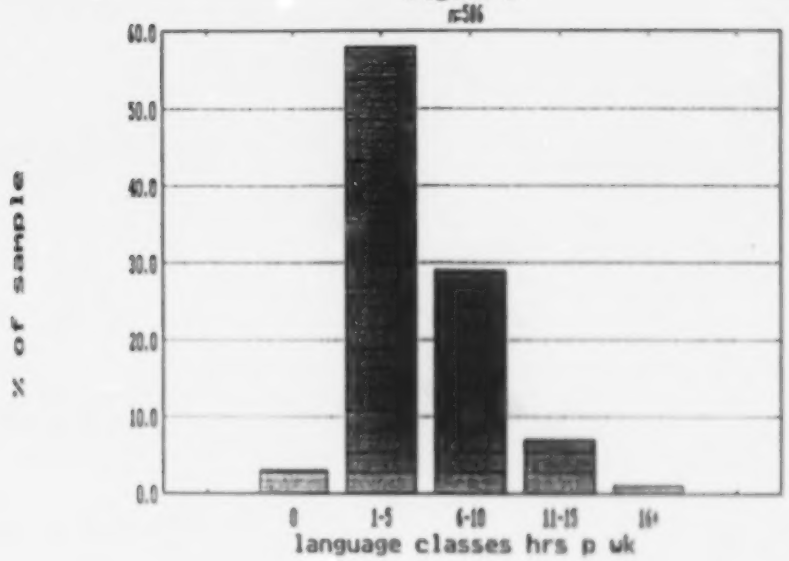

n=586
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1-5
6-10
11-15
16+
language classes hrs p wk

Figure 3

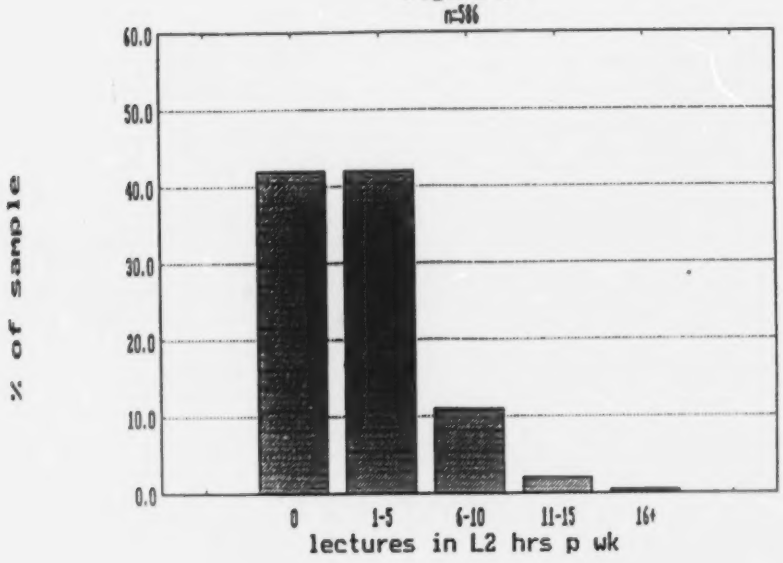

n=586
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1-5
6-10
11-15
16+
lectures in L2 hrs p wk

Figure 4

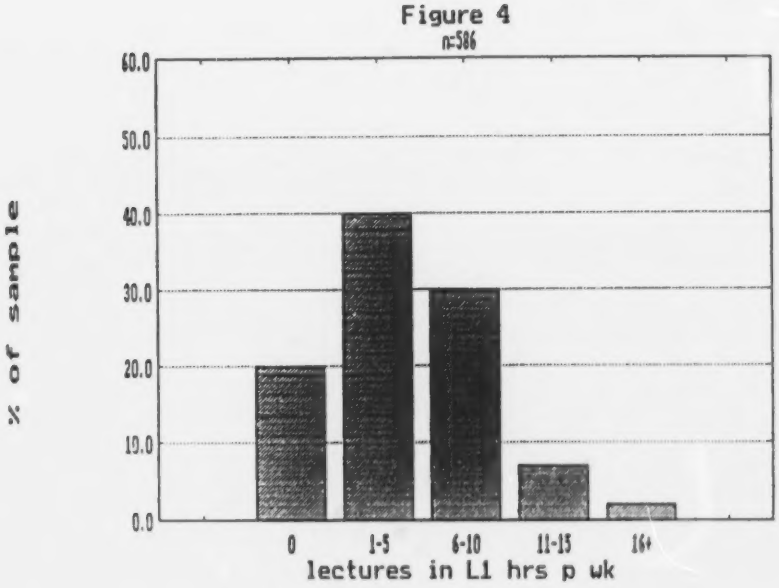
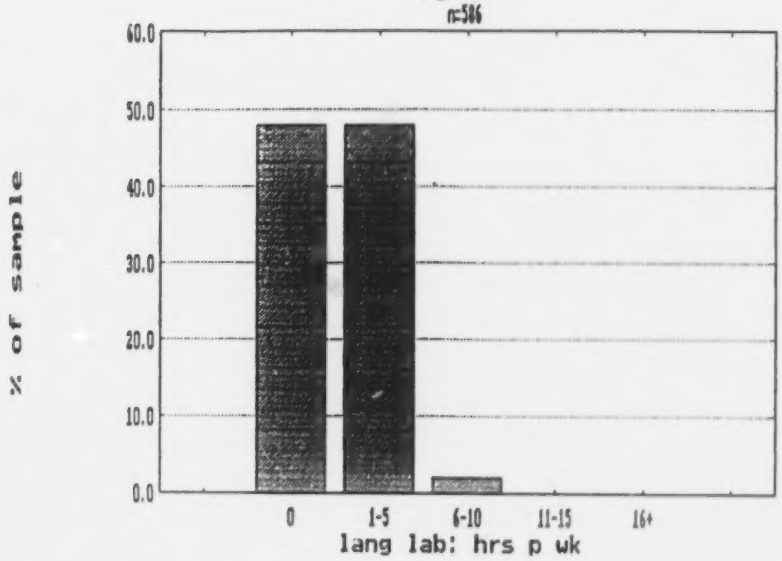

n=586
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1-5
6-10
11-15
16+
lectures in L1 hrs p wk

Figure 5


n=586
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1-5
6-10
11-15
16+
lang lab: hrs p wk

The respondents report that they spend substantial amounts of time in reading-related activities. Figure 6 shows the amount of time respondents spent reading in their foreign language, and figure 7 shows how this compares with time spent reading in English. 8% of the sample did no reading at all in the foreign language. 48% of the sample spent between 1 and 5 hours a week reading material in the foreign language. The pattern for reading in English is very different. Only 24% of the sample claimed to spend more than 5 hours a week reading English material: the equivalent figure for L2 is 44%. In addition, a surprisingly high number of respondents claimed that they read no English material at all. It would be plausible to suppose that these people, who account for 24% of the total sample spend all their time reading in the foreign language, but this appears not to be the case. 24 respondents (4%) claimed not to read anything at all. For the sample as a whole, there is a highly significant tendency for people who read a lot in the foreign language to read a lot in English as well ($r=.308$, $p<.001$, $n=586$). (See figures 6 and 7.)

Translation classes, both into and out of the foreign language contribute a substantial proportion of the total time spent in language study. 76% of the sample spends two or more hours each week doing translations from the foreign language into English, and an identical proportion spends more than two hours doing translations in the opposite direction. A very small minority, (4%) avoid doing any translation work at all. (See figures 8 and 9).

Most students spend some time each week writing in their foreign language, although, again, a substantial number of respondents claim that they do not do any writing in the foreign language (14%). Of those who do, 58% spend three hours per week or less in writing activities. As we shall see in a leter report, these students do not seem to value writing in the foreign language as a skill that is worth acquiring: they rate their writing skills as much worse than any of the other skills, and register very little progress in this area when they are abroad. This does not appear to be simply prejudice against writing in the foreign language, however: writing in English shows a very similar pattern. Here, fully 22% of the sample claim to do no writing in English; of the remainder, 38% do less than three hours writing each week. (See figures 10 and 11.)

Grammatical exercises play almost no part in the curriculum. 60% of the respondents spent no time at all on grammatical exercises. Only 8% of the sample spent more than two hours on this activity. (See figure 12.)
However, almost all respondents spent some time each week talking in a foreign language with a native speaker. Only 7% of the sample managed to avoid this type of contact. More than a quarter of the respondents (26%) spent three or more hours a week in this way. (See figure 13.)

Figure 6

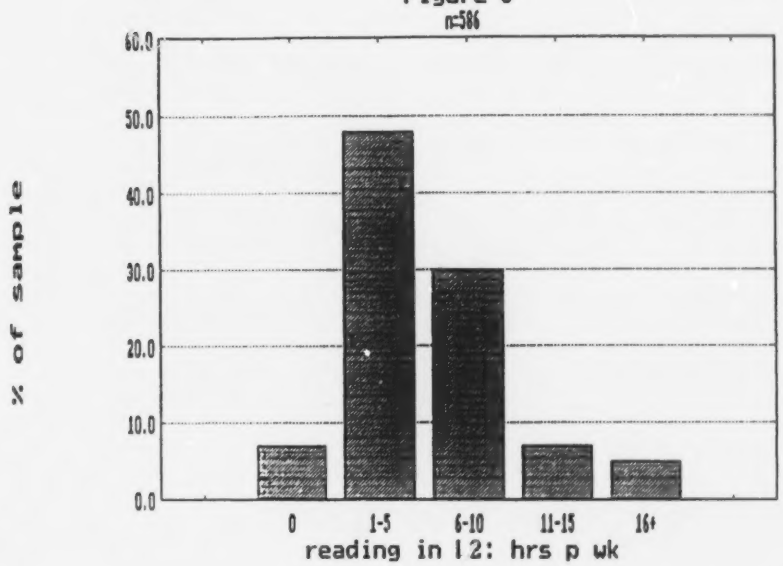

n=586
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1-5
6-10
11-15
16+
reading in 12: hrs p wk

Figure 7

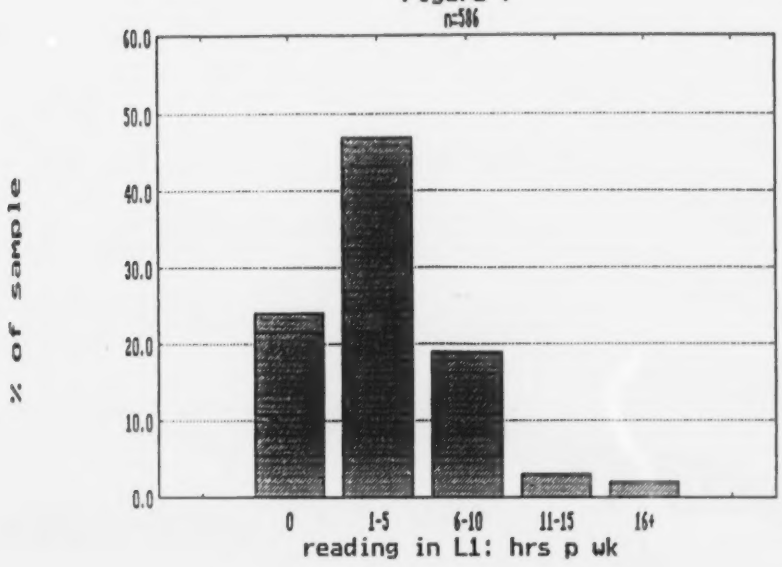

n=586
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1-5
6-10
11-15
16+
reading in L1: hrs p wk

Figure 8

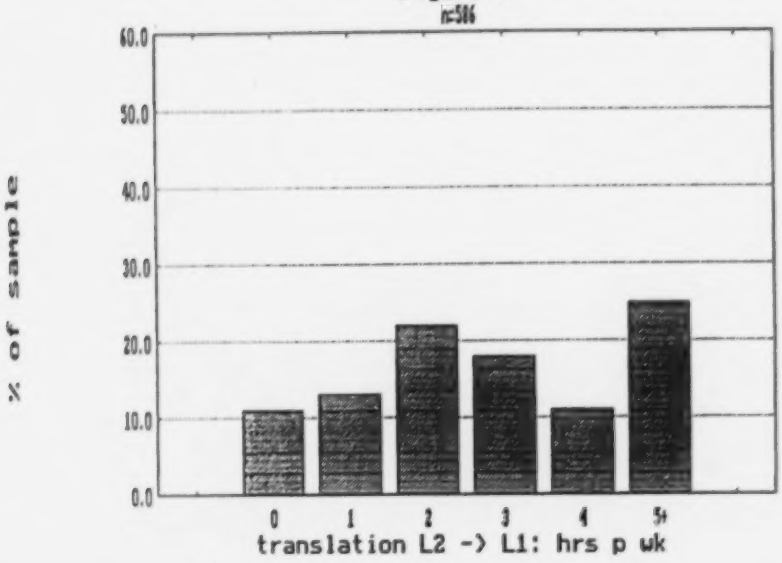

n=586
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1
2
3
4
5+
translation L2 -> L1: hrs p wk

Figure 9

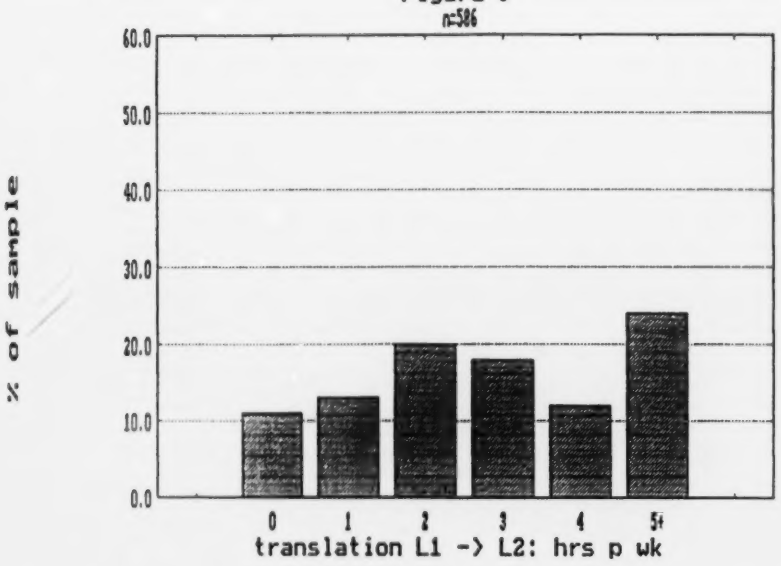

n=586
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1
2
3
4
5+
translation L1 -> L2: hrs p wk

Figure 10

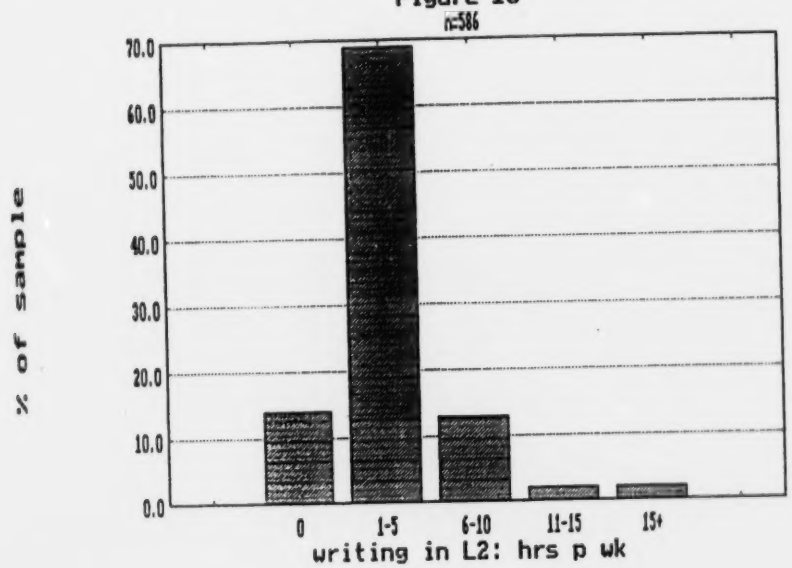

n=586
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1-5
6-10
11-15
15+
writing in L2: hrs p wk

Figure 11

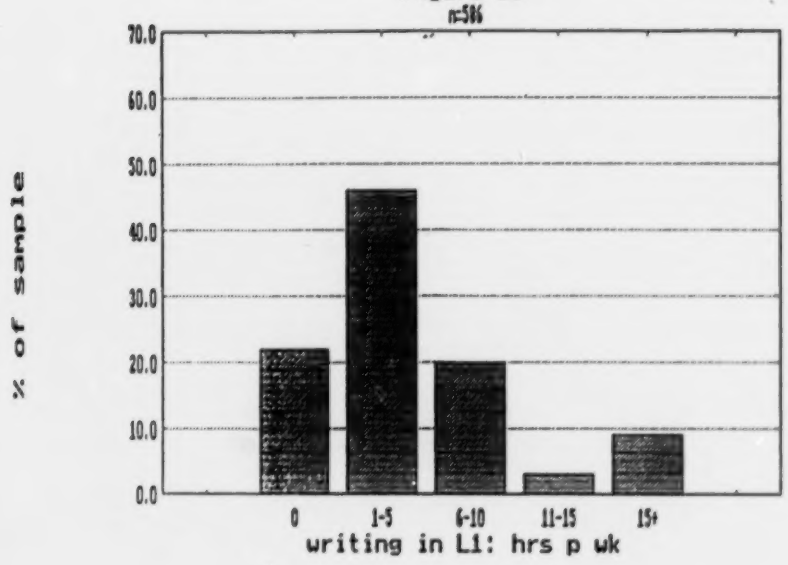

n=586
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1-5
6-10
11-15
15+
writing in L1: hrs p wk

Figure 12

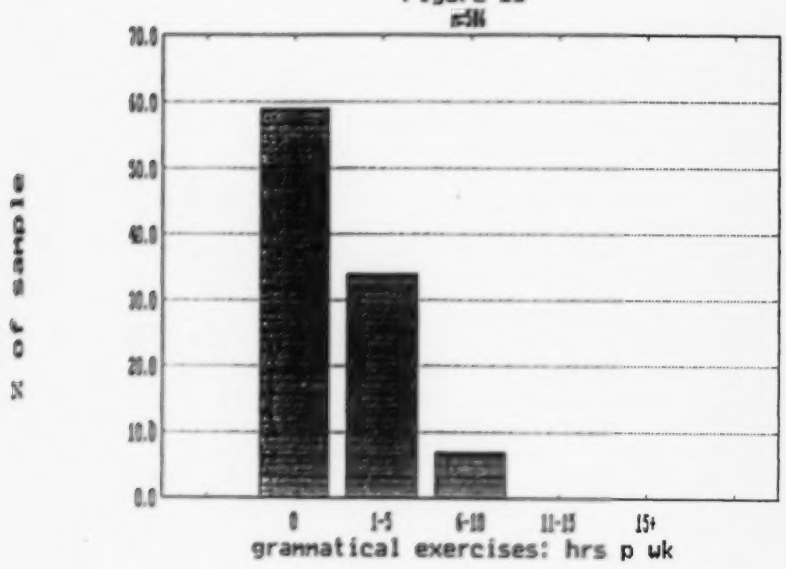
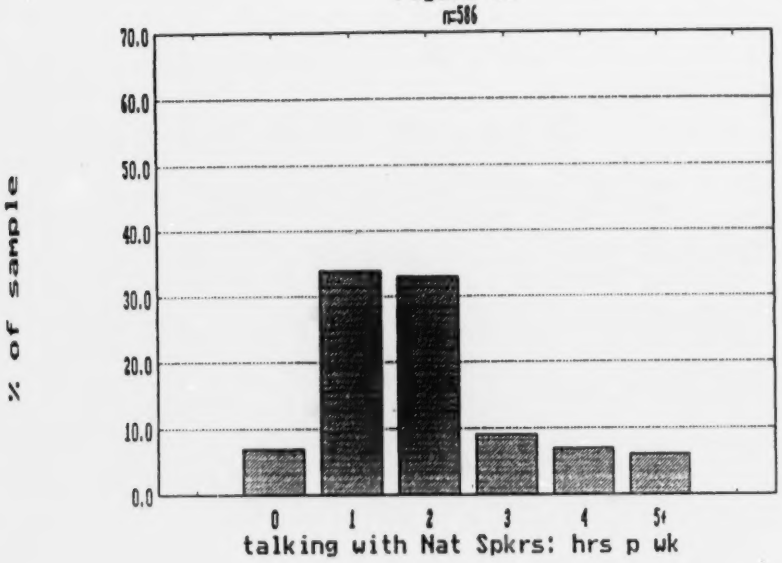

70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1-5
6-10
11-15
15+
grammatical exercises: hrs p wk

Figure 13


n=586
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
0
1
2
3
4
5+
talking with Nat Spkrs: hrs p wk

The overall picture to emerge from this data is quite complex. Apart from the relatively small amount of time spent in language laboratories or using computers, all the questions produced a very wide range of responses, and it is difficult to see clear, coherent patterns in the data. If we take the modal reply to each question - ie. the reply which describes most of the respondents - then the picture that emerges of the typical modern language student looks something like table 2 below.

Table 2: a modal modern language student profile

The typical student is female.

She spends between 20 and 30 hours per week on language related activities.

Three hours each week are spent attending language classes.

She is quite likely to get no lectures in her foreign language, but if she does, it will be about two hours each week.

She is also likely to attend four hours or so of lectures in English.

If she is lucky, she may get an hour each week in a language laboratory, but it is more likely that no language laboratory classes will be available. She will not have the chance to use a computer laboratory.

A part of her time goes in reading: about 2 hours each week reading in her foreign language, though she could be part of minority who spend more than 10 hours a week in this way. A further 2 hours goes on reading in English.

She will almost certainly spend four hours a week in translation activities, two hours translating into English from her foreign language, and two hours in the other direction.

She spends about 2 hours each week writing in her foreign language. She might be able to avoid writing in English altogether, but if not, then she will probably spend a further two hours writing in English.

She spends no time on grammar exercises, but does spend one or two hours each week talking in her foreign language with a native speaker.

This profile does not quite add up to the 20 or 30 hours that the typical student claims to spend in language related activities. The total comes to about 24 hours, and may account for even less when the overlap between the questions is taken into account. It does, however, bear a striking resemblance to my earlier description of my own experience in the 1960s. The 1980s student seems to get more oral practice than I did, and rather less emphasis seems to be put on writing skills, qnd reading in English. Structurally, however, the profiles are very similar.

It is important to remember that the variation from this "typical profile" is very great, and this means that individual students can vary quite considerably from the pattern in table 2. In spite of this, there does seem to be a surprising amount of agreement over the main components of courses, and how teaching and learning should be structured. Individual students seem to vary principally in the number of hours they put into their languages, but once you correct for this variable, a high degree of consensus emerges. Figure 14 shows how six real respondents, chosen at random from the entire sample, claim to have spent their week. The activities in the questionnaire have been grouped into three loosely identifiable categories: work in L2 (i.e. reading, writing, talking in the L2), work in L1 (reading, and writing in the L1) and translating. The data in this figure has been expressed as a percentage of total time given to these activity types, in order to iron out the differences due to total amount of time given to languages: the total time does not include formal classes and lectures, but does include everything else that can be quantified. It is immediately apparent that, with the exception of case1, all the respondents spend about 20% of their study time on translating. Case 1 spends just over twice the average amount, but compensates for this by having a very low level of L1 activity. In general, L2 activity accounts for about one third of study time, and there is very little variation in this figure. In most cases, L1 activity accounts for something like 40% of the total time. This figure represents a small but significant shift towards the L2: a detailed analysis of the data suggests that it is largely accounted for by an increase in L2 oral work, with L2 written work accounting for a relatively small proportion of the total.

What do the students themselves think of what they do? The final two questions in NSQ asked the respondents to say which three activities they found most useful, and most enjoyable. This data is summarised in figures 15 and 16, which shows the proportion of respondents who listed each of the activities as either useful or enjoyable. The letters at the foot of these figures correspond to the questions in Table 1. The activities are listed in order of their enjoyability: items listed by many respondents lie at the left end of the figure, items listed by few respondents at the right.

The data on item (m) - using a computer - is unreliable because only a tiny proportion of the respondents had experienced computers. Apart from this, doing grammatical exercises was listed as enjoyable by the smallest number of respondents, followed very closely by writing in English. Attending lectures in English or in the foreign language, using language laboratories, and reading and writing in English were all relatively unenjoyable activities: all of these items were listed by less than 15% of the total sample. The clear winner on the enjoyability scale is item (l), talking in a foreign language with a native speaker. This item was nominated by 68% of the entire sample, and scored 26% more nominations than the nearest rival, item (e) - reading in a foreign language - which was nominated by only 42%.

A rather different picture emerges on the second rating scale, which asked respondents to say how useful they found the various activities. Again, the data for item (m) is unreliable because of the very small numbers who had experienced computers. Item (j) - writing in English - was thought to be useful by only a handful of students (1%), second only to item (f) - reading in English - judged useful by only 8% of respondents. Items (g) and (h) - translating into and out of the foreign language - produced peculiar responses. Just under 50% of the sample thought that translation into the foreign language was useful, a very large increase on the number of people who thought it was enjoyable. Item (g) - doing translations from the foreign language into English - produced the opposite pattern: some 32% of the sample thought this activity was enjoyable, but only half that number thought it was useful.

The clear winner on both scales is item (l) - talking in a foreign language with a native speaker: this item scores more than twice as many nominations for all other activities except translating.

Figure 14

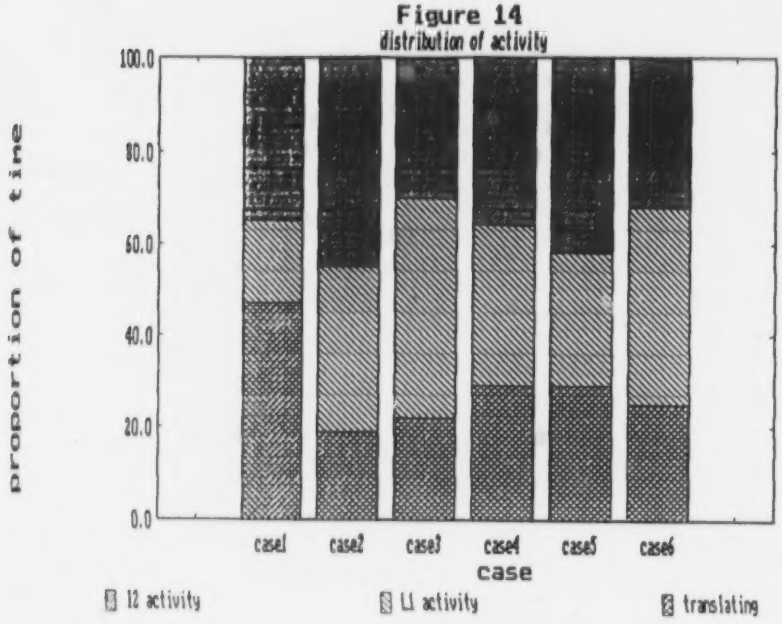

distribution of activity
proportion of time
100.0
80.0
60.0
40.0
20.0
0.0
case1
case2
case3
case4
case5
case6
case
I2 activity
L1 activity
translating

Figure 15

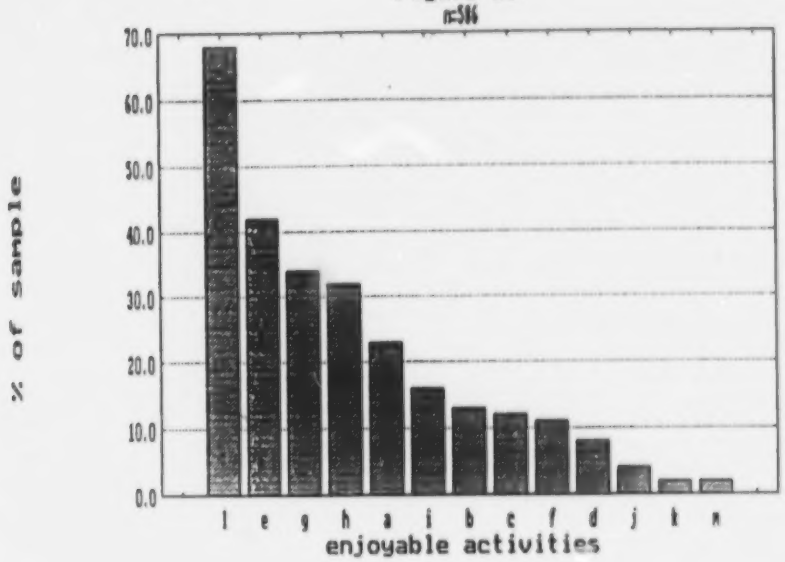
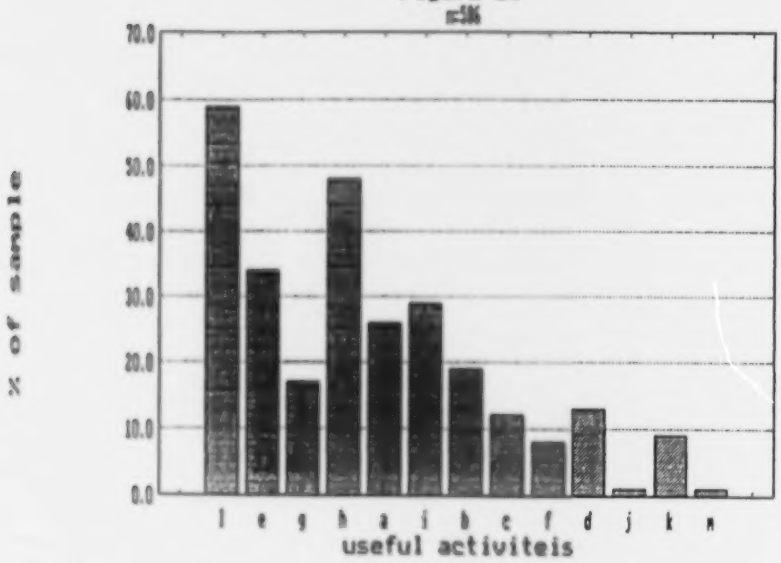

n=56
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
l e g h a i b c f d j k m
enjoyable activities

Figure 16


70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
l e g h a i b c f d j k m
useful activiteis

CONCLUSIONS

Some time ago, the various electricity supply boards ran a research project aimed at making electric cookers more efficient, and less wasteful of energy. Several different designs of cooker were tested, and a large number of "housewives" were invited to try them out. Each cook was asked to make a set number of meals, and the amount of heat she used was carefully measured. The data showed that there was a colossal amount of variation between cooks, and a rather small amount of variation between the different stove designs: some cooks used a lot of energy regardless of which stove they used, while others were less profligate. These differences were so great that the variations in stove design paled into insignificance by comparison. Much the same thing can be said of the data here.

One's first impression is that this data is difficult to interpret in any coherent way. The most that can be said is that there is a huge amount of variation among the sample of respondents, and this variation is such that it is not easy to find clear patterns in the data. Some of the variation is undoubtedly due to variations in the formal teaching offered by departments - how much study time is pre-empted by formal classes and lectures -, but much of it is clearly a a personal matter - a product of how hard people are prepared to work, and how much time they put into their studies. It would have been possible to subdivide the sample into those who put in long hours and those whose hours were much shorter, but it is not obvious that anything of importance would have been gained by doing so with this part of the questionnaire.

Nonetheless, despite these difficulties, it is possible to find some fixed points in the data as a whole. A major surprise is the stability of translation as a teaching method. Traditional language teaching methods are often referred to as the "grammar-translation" methods. These methods have been widely criticised in the literature, but the practical impactof this criticism seems to have made itself felt on the teaching of grammar. As far as we can tell from this survey, grammar teaching has effectively disappeared, while translation has remained largely unaffected. To some extent, this must be the result of the shift towards aural skills at the expense of writing.

The second surprise in this data is the very low proportion of time that the respondents spent using language laboratories. To be fair, the question was very narrowly framed in terms of language laboratories, rather than tape-recorders or satellite TV, and it is possible that this may have restricted the range of answers provided.

A third surprise is the lack of any clear move towards use of new technologies based on Information Technologies. Again, to be fair, at the time NSQ was implemented, stand-alone

micro-computers, were still extremely expensive, and were not widely available outside science departments. It is possible that public awareness of the importance of IT, and the dramatic fall in the price of these machines may have changed the way they are viewed by language departments. My own feeling is that the availability of cheap hardware is less important than the availability of good software, and there is a hint of this in the Nuffield data: of the 10 respondents who said that their experience of microcomputers was enjoyable, only 6 also felt it was useful. It is difficult to see departments spending serious money on computers until really good software becomes available at reasonable prices. Unfortunately, however, very little of the commercially available language software seems to meet these standards.

The one outstanding fixed feature in the data is the psychological importance of the non-native speaking assistant for most language students. The fact that 60% of the respondents rated talking with a foreign assistant as both useful AND enjoyable is obviously of major importance. The irony, of course, is that, while a great deal of lip-service is paid to the important role of assistants, their terms of employment make them particularly vulnerable to budget cuts. A recent report, sponsored by the Nuffield Foundation, (Lodge 1992) shows that most university departments now have relatively low numbers of foreign language assistants. The obvious temptation must be to replace real assistants by computers whose running costs are negligible once their initial start-up costs have been met. The data here suggest that moves in this direction would make modern language courses seem very much less enjoyable, and ultimately less effective.

REFERENCES

Department of Education and Science. (1989). *Modern Languages in polytechnics and colleges: a survey of good practice.* London: Department of Education and Science.

Healey FG. (1967). *Foreign language teaching in the Universities.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Grauberg, W. (1990). *Language Teaching in the UK - 21 years on.* Southampton: University of Southampton, Language Centre.

Lodge, A. (1992). Lectors in British University Language Departments. Newcastle University: unpublished paper.

Sewell, P. (1989). Survey of language-learning activities. *Association for French Language Studies Newsletter* 24, 20-24.

What should language graduates be able to do?

This paper is the second of a series of studies based on data collected as part of the Nuffield Modern Languages Inquiry in 1986. In the previous paper, I looked at the sorts of activities students of modern languages engage in, and how their time is structured. One of the main points to emerge from that discussion was how little time the majority of students spend on activities that are specifically designed to help them learn their foreign language. To a large extent, however, what students do with their time depends on what they think is important, and it therefore seemed interesting to look next at what students expected of the language courses that they were following.

This issue is addressed by question 39 of the Nuffield Students Questionnaire, which is reproduced in Table 1.

The question asks the respondents to rate, on a three point scale, a set of statements about an ideal graduate of a language course, and then to state how closely their own ability corresponds to this ideal. The question is actually posed in an ambiguous way, and this makes the data it produces slightly difficult to interpret. The point of the ambiguity is that it is not clear whether the self-ratings apply to the respondents' own ability NOW, or how they see themselves at the end of their course -- their ideal self-ratings, as it were. However, the first interpretation seems more probable than the second, and that is the one that will be adopted here. The data are summarised in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Table 1: extract from the Nuffield Students'Questionnaire

39. Please rate the extent to which YOU think that graduates of degree courses with a foreign language component SHOULD be able to do each of the following; then in the last column put the number that you feel corresponds to your OWN ability, putting a 3 if a statement is very true of you, 2 if it is fairly true and 1 if it is not true of your own ability.

	not necessarily		definitely should	myself
a) understand and make themselves understood abroad	1	2	3	____
b) converse with near-native fluency	1	2	3	____
c) adapt the spoken language to a particular situation	1	2	3	____
d) write the language fluently and in an appropriate style	1	2	3	____
e) follow radio or TV programmes	1	2	3	____
f) pick up topical or cultural allusions	1	2	3	____
g) recommend a selection of books, films, plays or records	1	2	3	____
h) discuss the arts in a formal social setting	1	2	3	____
i) discuss sporting events	1	2	3	____
j) read the newspapers with understanding	1	2	3	____
k) read technical, commercial or specialist material	1	2	3	____
l) understand the social structures and institutions	1	2	3	____
m) deal competently with everyday affairs in the country	1	2	3	____
n) write and speak conventional "good" French (or German, etc)	1	2	3	____
o) function as a translator/ interpreter	1	2	3	____
p) other (please specify)	1	2	3	____

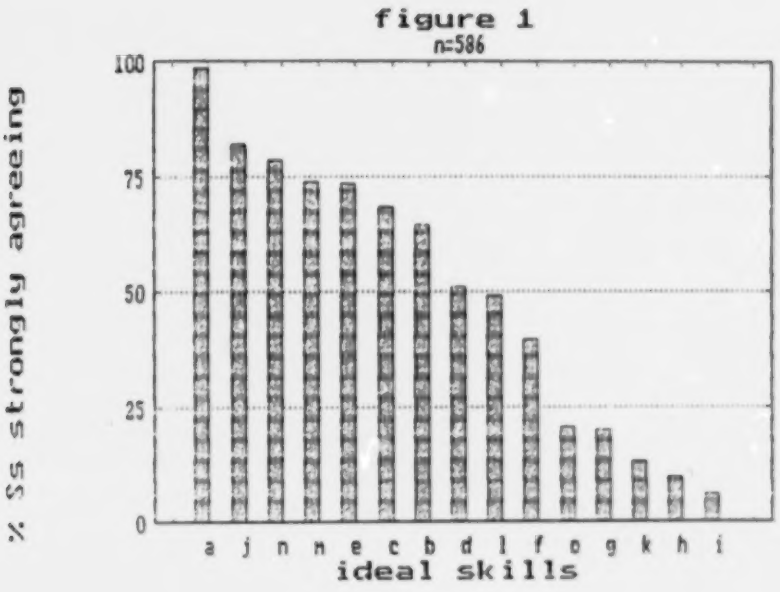
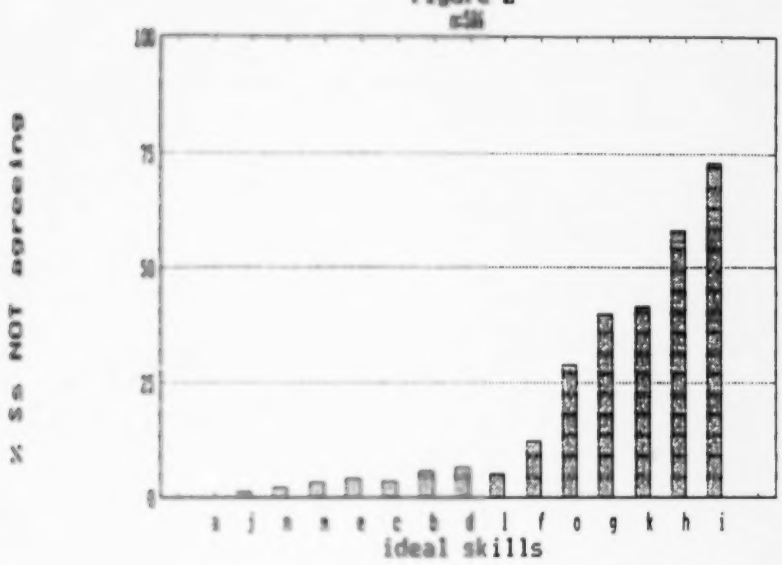


figure 1
n=586
% Ss strongly agreeing
100
75
50
25
0
a j n m e c b d l f o g k h i
ideal skills

Figure 2



There are 16 sub-features in the question. The last one, however, is difficult to interpret because it varies from one respondent to another. In fact, only a handful of respondents replied to question (p), and so this analysis concentrates on the remaining 15 features.

Data from 586 respondents was available. The sample has been described more fully in the previous paper in this series.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents who thought that each of the 15 features definitely should be part of the repertoire of a language graduate. The features have been ranked in order, features ranked highly by large numbers of respondents to the left of the graph, features ranked highly by only a small number of people to the right. The letters along the x-axis of the chart correspond to the letters that identify the sub-questions in Table 1.

The data contains a number of surprises. Firstly, only 8 of the 15 features were highly rated by more than half of the respondents. The most highly rated features were a, j and n (*understand and make themselves understood abroad, read the newspapers with understanding*, and *write and speak good French, German etc*). On the other hand, agreement on some of the other features was surprisingly low. Item (h), for instance (*discuss the arts in a formal social setting*) was rated highly by less than 10% of the respondents; item (k), (*read technical, commercial or specialist material*), was rated highly by only 13%; just 20% rated the ability to function as an interpreter or translator highly.

The first of these low ratings is odd in that a large proportion of the language that students are exposed to on their courses is very much concerned with discussing the arts in a formal social setting. There appears to be an important mismatch here between what the students actually get, and what they think they ought to be getting on their courses. The other two figures are important because of likely changes in the pattern of employment after the European Single Market comes into force in 1993. All the signs are that this development is likely to produce a significant demand for linguists who can both translate and interpret AND can handle technical, commercial or specialist material. The low importance accorded to these skills by the respondents suggests that they may not be aware of the kinds of skills that society expects linguists to have.

Figure 2 shows that the features which attract few high ratings are not just rated neutrally. They actually tend to attract low ratings. For instance 42% of the sample suggested that the ability to read technical material should not necessarily be part of a language graduates' repertoire.

In some ways, however, a more disturbing aspect of this data is not the extreme features, which attracted very high or very low average ratings, but those features which fall in

the middle of Figure 1. Consider, for example, that only 40% of the sample felt that graduates should be able to pick up topical or cultural allusions in their foreign language; only 49% felt that an ability to understand the social structures and institutions of countries where their language was spoken might be important; only half the respondents felt that an ability to write the language fluently and appropriately was a skill that graduates should definitely have at their disposal; even the ability to converse with near-native fluency was identified as essential by only two thirds of the sample. This data is rather disturbing. It suggests that the consensus that exists among language teachers about the reasons for learning and teaching languages may not in fact be shared by those that they teach. It is also disturbing because it suggests that language students have some very odd views about the nature of language, and some very simplistic views about what they are studying for.

It is difficult to be certain of this interpretation without collecting comparable data about attitudes from teachers, of course, but the data here suggests that it would be well worthwhile for someone to do a study which compared the objectives of language teachers, both in schools and in higher education, with the assumptions made by their students. My own guess would be that recent curriculum changes in schools - notably the stress on oral/aural skills in examinations - might have made these discrepancies worse.

In addition to discrepancies between the assumptions of students and their teachers, the data also suggests that there might perhaps be a similar discrepancy between the expectations of language graduates and their likely employers. Again, this is an area which has considerable implications, both for the students themsleves, but also for the country as a whole. Some information about the expectations of employers was collected as part of the Nuffield Inquiry, and will be discussed in a later report. To my knowledge, no other data in this area have been published, though some of the issues are discussed in Hagen (1988).

How do the respondents in the Nuffield Inquiry rate their own skills? The answer to this question is to be found in Figure 3. This figure shows the percentage of respondents who rated themselves highly on the features listed in Table 1. The features are ordered as in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Figure 3 is best interpreted as the % of respondents who felt that a particular feature was already part of their own competence.

In all cases except one, these *self-ratings* are lower than the *ideal ratings* shown in Figure 1, and in most cases there is a substantial difference between the two scores. The only exception is item (i), the *ability to discuss sporting events*: a small number of people rated their competence in this area as high, though few of them thought that it should definitely form part of a graduate linguist's competence.

figure 3

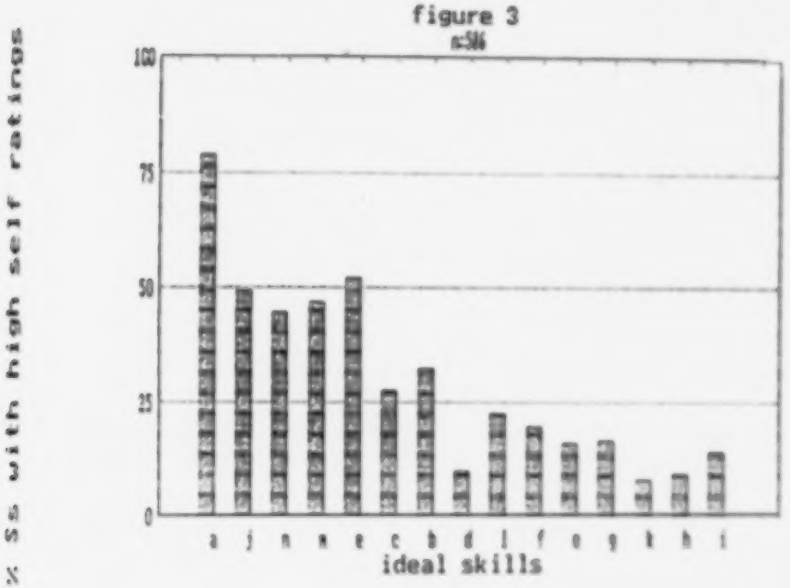
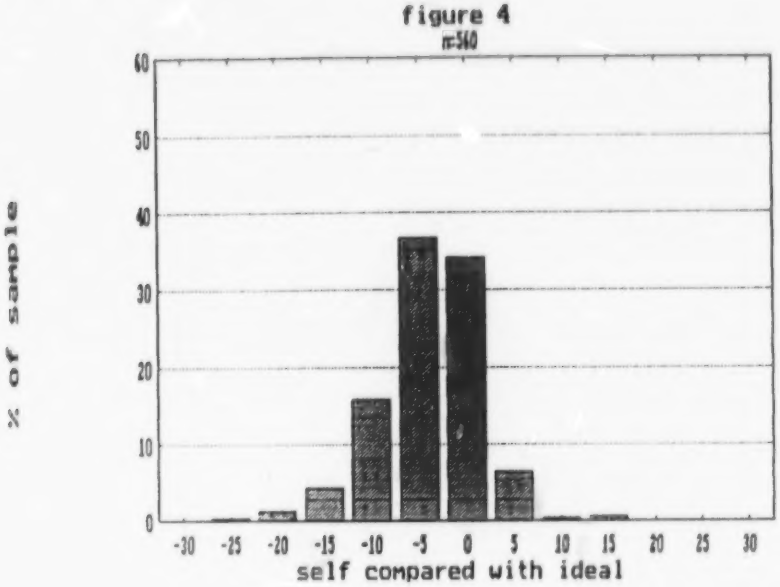

n=586
100
75
50
25
0
a j n m e c b d l f o g k h i
ideal skills
% Ss with high self ratings

figure 4


n=560
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
% of sample
-30 -25 -20 -15 -10 -5 0 5 10 15 20 25 30
self compared with ideal

The obvious interpretation of Figure 3 suggests that, in general, respondents were cautious about their own skills, and they sometimes felt that they could not do all the things that a graduate linguist ought to be able to do. A surprising 79% felt that they could already *understand and make themselves understood abroad*, but in general, there was some discrepancy between respondents' self-ratings and their ideal-ratings.

This discrepancy can be seen by comparing Figure 1 with Figure 3 directly, but this is a fairly crude way of making the appropriate comparisons. These two figures show only the extreme ratings made by the respondents, and does not take into account the very large number of intermediate ratings that were supplied. It is possible to do some rather more sophisticated analysis of the data by constructing an overall confidence score for each respondent. A respondent's confidence score is calculated by adding up her ideal-ratings for each of the 15 features in Table 1 and her self-ratings for the same 15 features subtracting the former from the latter.

Given that there are 15 features, and that the largest discrepancy between the ratings on a three-point scale is two, the raw overall discrepancy score can vary between -30 and +30.
A negative confidence score indicates that the respondent's self image is not as good as her ideal. A score of zero indicates that her self image matches her ideal exactly. A positive score indicates that her overall self-image is actually better than her ideal.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of these confidence scores among the respondents. Complete data was available from 560 respondents: 26 provided only partial answers to some of the questions, and they were excluded from the analysis. For simplicity, the scores are grouped in bands centred on the figures on the x-axis, so that 5 here represents a range of scores from 3 to 7, 0 represents a range from -2 to 2, and so on.

Figure 4 presents a rather different picture from the one in shown in figure 3. Far from being cautious about their own skills, the respondents here seem to have an optimistic, almost uncritical view of their abilities. The average confidence score very close to zero, indicating that most respondents thought their current abilities were quite close to their ideal. A quarter of the respondents produce confidence scores of zero or higher, indicating that their self-ratings were equal to or higher than their ideal-ratings. A further 41% of the respondents produced confidence scores between -1 and -5, leaving only a third of respondents who thought there was a serious discrepancy between their their self-ratings and what they considered appropriate for an ideal graduate.

Given that none of these students had completed their degrees at the time, this represents a surprisingly high degree of self-confidence.

Further analysis suggests that the level of confidence varied significantly between different sub-groups. The most important of these sub-divisions is Sex. Although there was no significant difference between the raw self-ratings of male and female students, a significant difference did emerge on the confidence scores (see figure 5). Females recorded a significantly larger discrepancy between their self-ratings and their ideal ratings than males did. This difference arise largely because females had higher expectations of an ideal graduate than male respondents did.

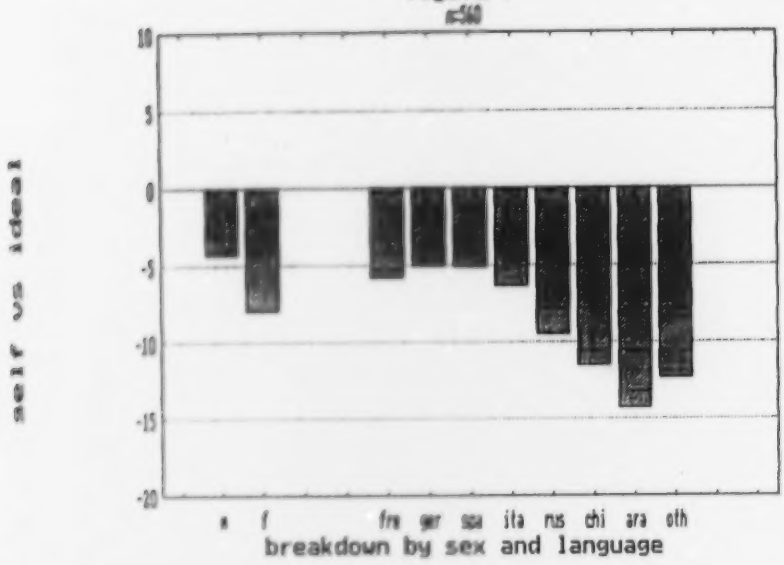
In order to make sense of this finding we really need to know how accurate the respondents' self-assessments are, and this is not possible given the data available. It is possible however, that female respondents are generally more self-critical than males, and tend to underestimate their real abilities.

Some significant differences are also to be found among students of different languages. Generally speaking, students whose main language was one of the "big four" - French, German, Spanish or Italian - rated their overall language ability higher than students who were studying other languages (see figure 5). Students of Chinese and Arabic in particular had significantly lower confidence scores than the European languages, with Russian falling in between. The score for the *other* column is difficult to interpret because it inlcudes a wide range of languages with a very small number of people studying them. The set of languages ranges from Korean and Japanese at one end through to Norwegian at the other.

There are two obvious interpretations of this data. One explanation is that the respondents studying Chinese and Arabic include a very high proportion of students who had not studied the language in school, and had begun from scratch in higher education. A second explanation is that Chinese and Arabic, and to some extent Russian, are genuinely "harder" languages than French, German Spanish and Italian, and require more effort for students to acieve reasonable levels of competence, even when allowance is made for ab initio effects.

The confidence scores do not seem to be affected by other variables. In particular, there were no discernible differences between students who considered their courses to be "literary based" and those whose courses were "language based". There were also no differences between people who thought these biases were a good thing or a bad thing.
Although figures 4 and 5 reveal a slightly different picture from the one shown in figure 3, it could be argued that the data is still somewhat misleading. The confidence scores in

Figure 5


n=560
10
5
0
-5
-10
-15
-20
self vs ideal
m
f
fre
ger
spa
ita
rus
chi
ara
oth
breakdown by sex and language

figures 4 and 5 take into account all 15 features listed in table 1, and this includes a large number of features which the respondents did not rate very important. This obviously reduces the chances of a discrepancy between their ideal ratings and their self-ratings. Perhaps the respondents would be more self-critical about their abilities on the features that formed part of almost everybody's ideal graduate performance? This data is shown in Figure 6.

Here I have recalculated the confidence scores for each respondent, but I have limited the data to five of the features in table 1. These features are (a), (j), (n), (m) and (e), which were judged to be important by at least 70% of the respondents. The data in figure 6 shows how people's self-ratings compared with their ideal ratings on these five points. With five features, the confidence scores can vary between -10 and +10, but I have scaled the data so that it is directly comparable with the data in figure 4.

The data shows essentially the same pattern as the earlier analysis. The scores show that tthe respondents are, if anything, slightly more confident of their own abilities on these five main criteria, than they were on the whole set of fifteen. 31% of the respondents thought they were as good or better than an ideal graduate as far as these central features were concerned. 91% of the respondents produced confidence scores that placed them in the three central bands of figure 6.

Figure 7 shows the breakdown by sex and language. In comparison with figure 5, students of hard languages seem to have lower confidence scores on the five main variables than they do on the entire set.

figure 6

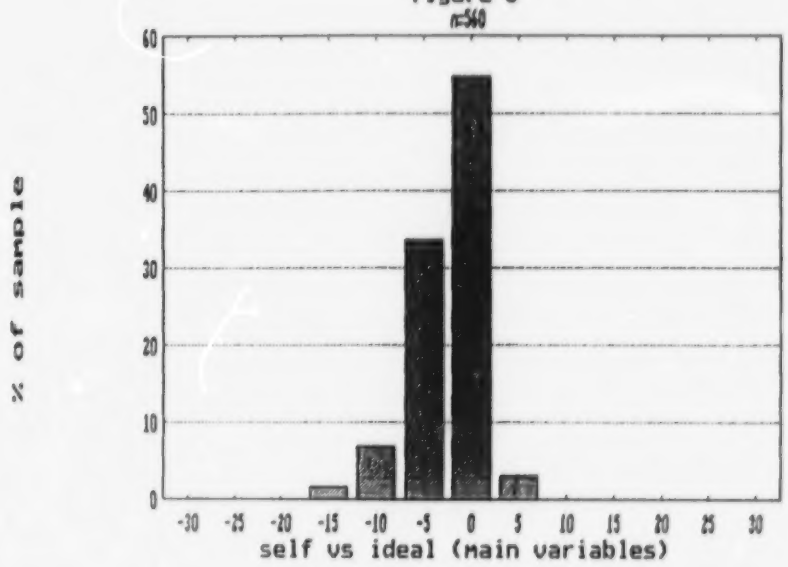
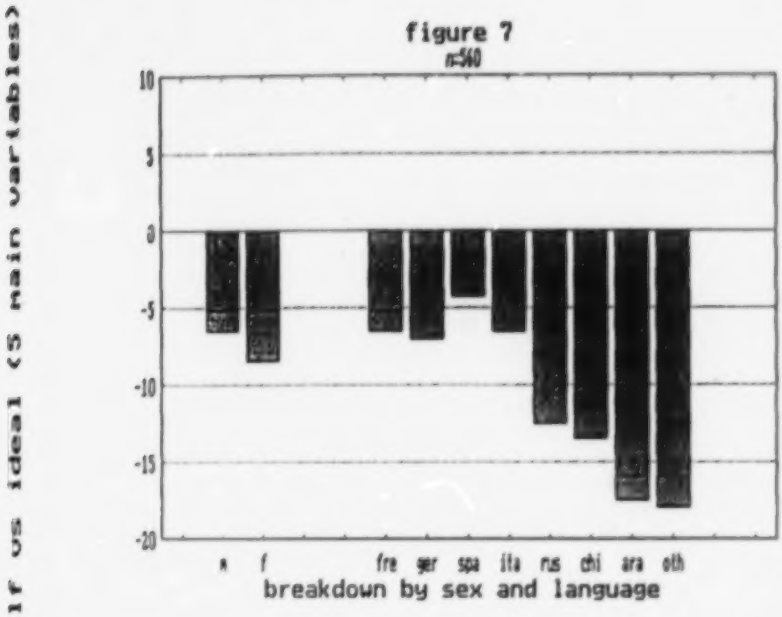

n=560
% of sample
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
-30
-25
-20
-15
-10
-5
0
5
10
15
20
25
30
self vs ideal (main variables)

figure 7



self vs ideal (5 main variables)

So far, this discussion has concentrated on the skills that language students think they ought to have at the end of their course. Obviously, skills of this sort do not appear spontaneously: they have to be learned, and this implies that the respondents will have strong views about some of the things that they are taught during their courses. This question was also addressed in the Nuffield Inquiry. The relevant question is question 40, which is reproduced in Table 2.

The question lists 16 features of typical language courses, and asks the respondent to say how much emphasis should be given to each feature in an ideal course, rating the features on a scale from 1 to 5. The responses are summarised in Figure 8, and may come as something of a surprise to some readers.

One possible explanation of the data reported so far is that the students are not really interested in language per se. Perhaps they rather resent the hard grind associated with language learning, and would prefer to spend their time studying literature. After all, a great deal of their time is spent in literature related activities. Unfortunately, the data does not support this view. Figure 8 shows the 16 features listed ranked in order. Features which achieved high ratings (a rating of 4 or 5) from most respondents appear on the left of this graph; features which failed to achieve a large number of high ratings appear on the right.

The surprising results are to be found at the right hand side of figure 8. Contemporary literature, and the study of literature in general found support from only a third of the sample. Item c (*writing in English about the literature and the culture*) was rated highly by only 26% of the respondents. This data clearly offers no support to those who think that the majority of students are treating their language degrees primarily as an opportunity to study literature in a foreign language.

Of the two main alternatives to literature, linguistics or area studies, it is linguistics that fares the worse. Only 13% of the sample said that they thought linguistics should be given a lot of emphasis on an ideal course, fewer even than people who thought that emphasis should be given to precis writing, or to reading technical and scientific material.

Area studies, as represented by questions o and p found considerably more support. 74% of the respondents thought that learning about the country should be emphasised, though less than 50% of the respondents were prepared to include history or geography in this.

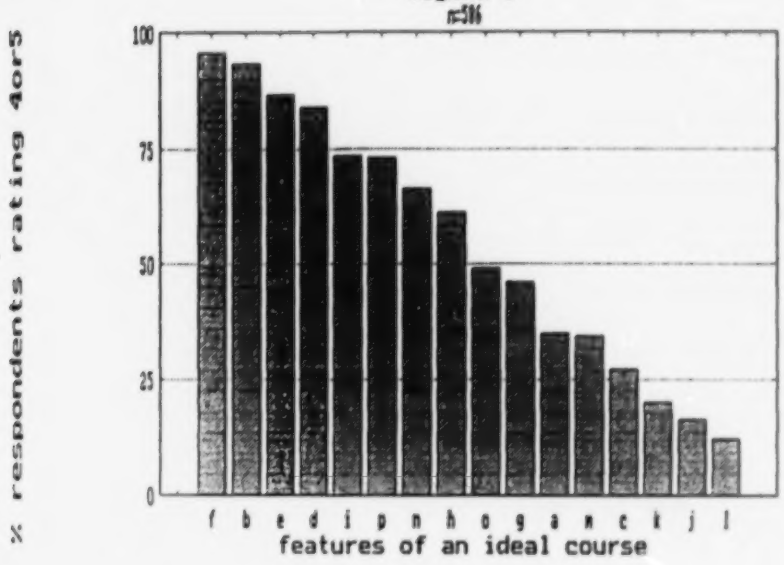
Predictably, the items which received strong support from nearly all the respondents were items f and b (*oral practice with a native speaker*, and *writing in a foreign language*), with *translation into and out of the L2* close behind.

Table 2: extract from the Nuffield Students' Questionnaire

40. ***Listed below are components of various foreign language courses. Please rate the emphasis which you think should be given to each on an ideal course.***

	none		some		a lot
a) contemporary literature in a foreign language	1	2	3	4	5
b) writing in a foreign language	1	2	3	4	5
c) writing in English about the literature, culture, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
d) translations from a language	1	2	3	4	5
e) translations into a language	1	2	3	4	5
f) oral practice with a native speaker	1	2	3	4	5
g) oral practice in the language laboratory	1	2	3	4	5
h) using radio, TV or video	1	2	3	4	5
i) reading newspapers/magazines from the country concerned	1	2	3	4	5
j) reading technical or industrial material in the language	1	2	3	4	5
k) precis writing	1	2	3	4	5
l) linguistics	1	2	3	4	5
m) literary studies	1	2	3	4	5
n) learning grammar	1	2	3	4	5
o) learning about the history and/or geography of the language	1	2	3	4	5
p) learning about the country, its institutions and way of life	1	2	3	4	5

figure 8


n=586
% respondents rating 4or5
100
75
50
25
0
f b e d i p n h o g a m c k j l
features of an ideal course

There are so many contradictions in this profile that it is really very difficult to make much sense of it. It is clear, however, that both literature and linguistics are minority interests for this group of respondents. If anything, their interests lie in practical language skills, but it remains very unclear what they actually want to do with these skills, other than to communicate with native speakers!

CONCLUSIONS

The main point that emerges from this data are that there is a surprisingly low level of agreement among students about what skills an ideal graduate linguist should possess. Features which would undoubtedly figure high in a list of priorities produced by teachers or by employers are noticeably absent here, and this must be a matter of some concern.

The second point is that there is a surprisingly high level of complacency among the respondents about their own language ability. This data is somewhat difficult to interpret because of the limitations of the three point rating scales, and the slightly ambiguous endpoints used in the scale descriptions. This makes it difficult for the respondents to show fine distinctions in their reactions to the questions. It is also difficult to estimate how reliable these judgements are in the absence of any objective information about the respondents' actual language skills. Nonetheless, the fact that the discrepancy between self-ratings and ideal ratings is typically very small suggests that for most language students, the motivation to improve their practical language skills may be at a dangerously low level.

Finally, when the students were asked to rate features of an ideal course, a surprisingly small number included either of the two main options: literature and linguistics. Evans (1988) has suggested, on the basis of in-depth interviews a small number of subjects, that Modern Languages is not really a homogeneous subject area with a shared common culture. Rather it is an uneasy alliance between "tribes" - the PHILITS, the EFCOMS, the POLISOX and SOCSCI - whose interests are very disparate, and who compete for control over the teaching of modern languages in higher education. Evans sees this plurality as helpful and adaptive, enabling the discipline to adapt with great rapidity to the changing environment (p177). The data reported here, however, suggests the plurality might not be adaptive enough. There still seems to be a serious discrepancy between the types of courses provided by the majority of Higher Education departments and what the customers actually want. There is a clear hint here that the range of courses available in the mid-1980s was failing to keep pace with changing expectations in the student population.

REFERENCES

Evans, C. *Language People: the experience of teaching and learning modern languages in British Universities.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press. 1988.

Hagen, S (ed). *Languages in British Business.* London: CILT. 1988.

The year abroad and its effects

This paper is the third of a series of reports based on data collected as part of the Nuffield Modern Languages Inquiry. The data reported here all comes from a questionnaire that was administered in 1986 to a sample of 586 language students, described more fully in the first paper in this series. The questions discussed are all concerned with how these students spent their year abroad, and what effect they felt it had on their foreign language skills.

Despite the huge amount of resources that the year abroad uses up, there is not a great deal of research on how effective it really is. Apart from a few very recent studies carried out in the US and in Canada, which are not directly relevant to the UK (Freed: 1990; Lussier: in press), there are only two substantial studies of the effects of the year abroad on language students. The first of these is Willis et al (1977). The second, a more recent study by Dyson, was undertaken on behalf of the Central Bureau (Dyson: 1988).

Willis et al (1977) is an impressive and thorough study of students from the University of Bradford. Willis also reviews earlier studies of the effects of residence abroad, but they conclude that most of the available work is NOT concerned with how a period abroad effects linguistic proficiency. The few studies that do address this issue seem to have looked at the effects of relatively short stays abroad, and to have used research instruments that left something to be desired. The Bradford project attempted to correct these defects by setting up a large-scale comparison between students from different institutions. Unfortunately, this intention was thwarted when a number of potential collaborators withdrew from the project. Willis et al cite as reasons for their withdrawal:

> "1) disagreement with the scope of the research in terms of linguistic skills and student attitudes to be evaluated;
> 2) a belief that an objective assessment of residence abroad could do little to complement subjective impressions of its value;
> 3) a fear that the findings of the research might introduce invidious comparisons between institutions;
> 4) a belief that the research might draw unwelcome attention to the practice of sending students abroad and lead to its restriction;
> 5) a reluctance to impose tests on students;
> 6) the competing demands of other on-going or recent research projects invloving language students." (p5).

As a result of these withdrawals, the study was restricted to a set of students from Bradford University. The problem with this is that the Bradford students were not at the time

typical of the majority of language students in the UK. Because of Bradford's history as a "technological university", students at Bradford appear to have followed courses which placed rather more emphasis on linguistic skills and rather less emphasis on literary skills than was common practice at the time. This makes it difficult to extrapolate from the Bradford data to a larger population. In addition, a large part of the Bradford data was concerned with personality traits, and how these affect the way students live and learn while they are abroad. This means that the data collected was in some ways more concerned with individual differences between students, and less concerned with trying to establish what was the general pattern among the student population at large.

Dyson's report is more recent. It was published in 1988, but the data reported was collected in 1985-86, which makes it exactly cotemporaneous with the data collected as part of the Nuffield Inquiry. As far as I am aware, however, there does not appear to have been any formal link between the two projects. Dyson's team devised a set of tests in French, German and Spanish, designed to assess skills in the foreign language. These tests included a listening test and a speaking test, but not tests of reading or writing, or other skills. No serious justification for this choice of tests is provided, though Dyson comments that the principal benefits likely to arise from a year abroad would generally be expected to lie in these areas (p3).

The tests used were specially designed for the project, and do not appear to have been standardised. The listening tests consisted of short "authentic" passages which were assessed by comprehension questions and transcription. The speaking tests were semi-structured oral production tasks. The tests seem to have been marked impressionistically, though some attempt was made to standardise the marking procedure, and a large part of the report is concerned with assessing the reliability and validity of the tests.

229 students were tested in total: 118 for French, 83 for German and 28 for Spanish. Each student did the same set of tests twice, once before the year abroad, and again on return. Dyson reports that a substantial improvement in linguistic competence in listening and speaking occurs as a result of the year abroad. The differences between the pre- and post-test are all highly significant. However, as Dyson points out, it is necessary to treat these conclusions with some caution: the measured improvement in the group means is largely due to a very large improvement found in the weaker students. Furthermore, the lack of any measure of progress in a group that did NOT spend a period of time abroad means that we can't ascribe the improvement unequivocally to this factor: some progress would have been made by students who had studied at home. What we really need to know is whether students who spend a time abroad improve more than students who stay at home, and if so in what skills

does this improvement occur.

Dyson also reports briefly on some questions which students answered on their return. The main one which concerns us here is the students' subjective assessments of how much improvement had occurred in relevant competencies. The data for French is reported in Table 1 below. A 3-point rating scale was used: 1=very little, 2=fair, 3=very substantial. There does not appear to be any comparison between this data and the data from students of other languages. No interpretation of this data is provided, though Dyson comments (p19) "these high ratings are reflected in the very enthusiastic comments about the value of the year abroad made in the interview in the speaking tests."

table 1 mean self-assessed improvement in FL competence

listening competence	2.82
speaking competence	2.56
reading competence	2.07
writing competence	1.58
knowledge about the country	2.47
general self-confidence	2.59

data from Dyson (1988) : p19

The Nuffield Inquiry was not primarily concerned with the question of how the year abroad affected foreign language skills, but the questionnaire which served as the main instrument did include 13 rather complex questions dealing with the year abroad. These questions are presented in a slightly modified form in Appendix 1. The questions asked for information about how much time the respondents had spent abroad both as part of their course, and during vacations; how these visits were arranged; what type of work was engaged in during the visits; what kind of preparation was provided before the visits, and what kind of debriefing occurred on return. The students were also asked to rate how much their skills had improved as a result of the visit.

The data is complicated by the fact that a large proportion of the students have made more than one visit during their course, and often they have visited more than one country and worked in more than one language. In order to simplify the discussion the data reported here concerns only visits for the respondents' "first language" - presumably the one the respondent judged to be the most important one. I have held over "second language" and "third language" data for a later report. The basic data for periods spent abroad is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1

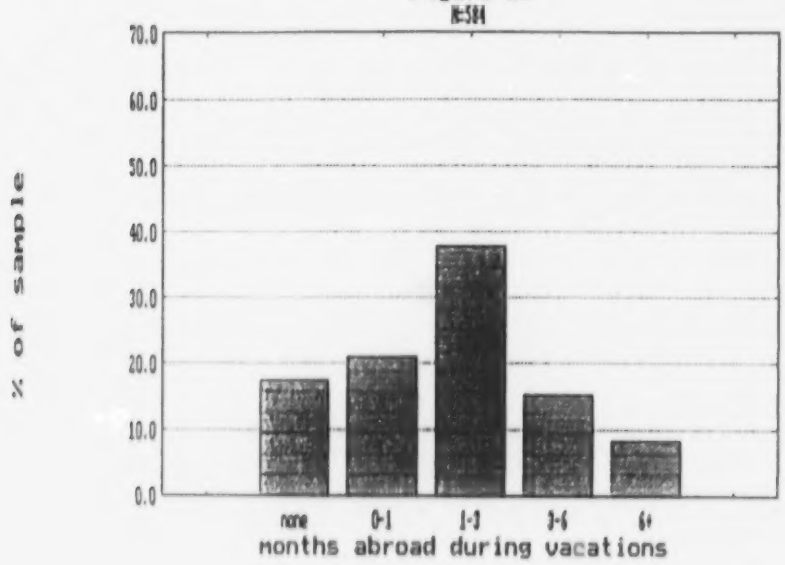

70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
none
0-1
1-3
3-6
6+
months abroad during vacations

Figure 1b

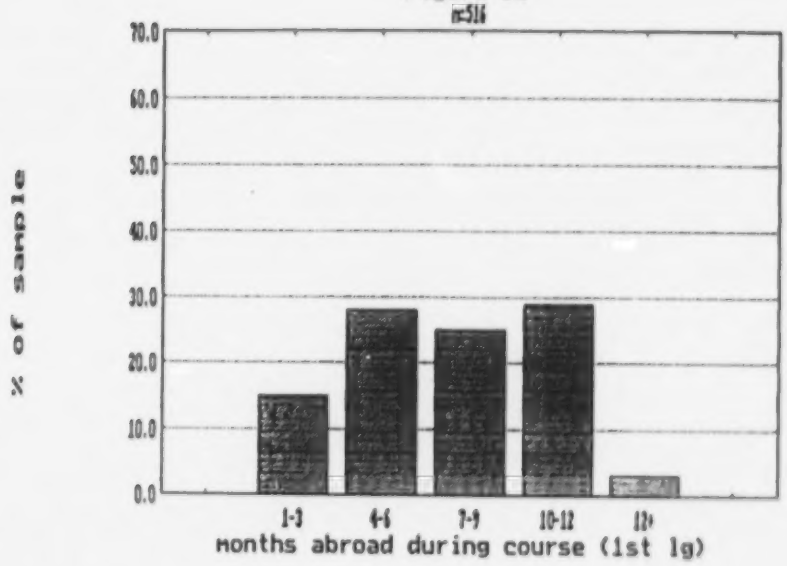
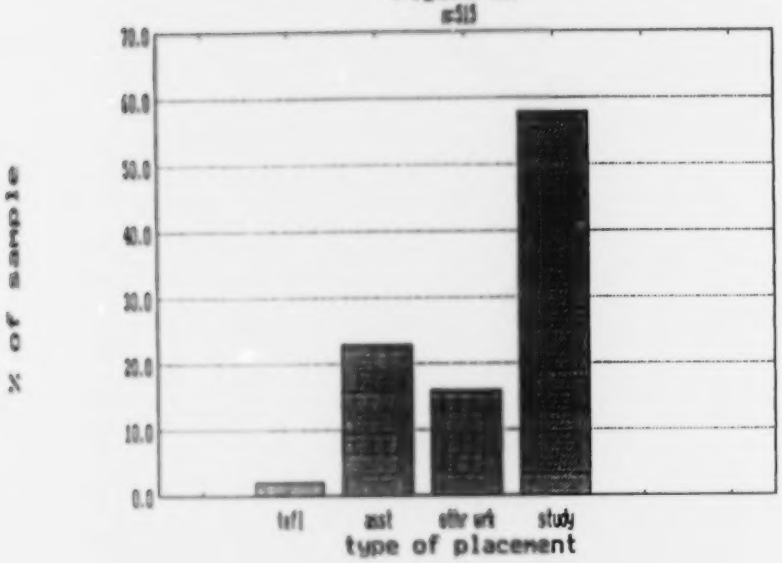

n=516
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
1-3
4-6
7-9
10-12
12+
months abroad during course (1st lg)

Figure 1c


70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
tefl
asl
study
type of placement

Although there is a great deal of official interest in the year abroad as part of a course, there is actually a large amount of informal, unmonitored contact time, which students undertake on their own initiative. Almost all students make a point of spending part of their vacations in a country where their language was spoken. Of the 586 respondents, 483 (82%) had spent varying amounts of time in this way - see figure 1a. The questionnaire did not ask how these visits were funded, but, given that discretionary travel awards are increasingly more difficult to obtain, it seems likely that these periods represent a considerable personal investment on the part of the respondents. The amount of time spent abroad during vacations varied considerably: Only 103 respondents - 18% - had spent no time abroad during their vacations. Of the remaining students, 137 or nearly a quarter of the whole sample, had spent three months or more abroad during vacations.

Almost all the respondents had also spent time abroad as part of their course. Only 62 (11%) had not been abroad in connection with their course work, and approximately half of these were expecting to do so at a later stage. The amount of time spent abroad varied considerably - the patterns being complicated by variations in the number of languages people were studying. Students doing two languages or more typically split their year abroad into two or more sections, while students doing only a single language spend the whole year at a single site. There is some anecdotal evidence that split years are less effective than a year spent in a single site. It is possible to address this question using the Nuffield data, but as the analysis is rather complicated, I have held it over for a later report. Figure 1b shows the pattern of residence abroad for the respondents' first language.

In most cases, the visit abroad was arranged by the department: 81% of the cases fell into this category. The largest group of respondents (58%) went on study placements. The remainder were mainly involved in teaching English either as assistants in French education establishments, or as TEFL teachers. Only 12% of the sample were involved in work placements outside education: see figure 1c. Whatever they were doing, substantial numbers of respondents (17%) claimed to have received no specific preparation from their department for these visits.

What we would really like to know is how students on a year abroad spend their time, and how far what they do genuinely improves their linguistic competence. The questionnaire replies in fact provide very few clues as to how the students actually spent their time while they were abroad, but the hints that do emerge are in some ways rather surprising. Question 30 asked the respondents to rate how much time they spent speaking the language when they were abroad on a scale from 1(=not very much) to 5=(a great deal). This data is difficult to interpret because the question is somewhat ambiguous. The end-points of the scale are basically

subjective terms (what counts as a lot for one person might count as a little for another, and in any case, the rating does not take into account the overall amount of talking that the respondent does). The data suggest that slightly less than half the respondents see themselves as spending "a great deal of time" speaking in the foreign language. 11% of the sample felt that they had spent only a little amount of time speaking the foreign language. (See Fig 2). As we shall see later, this factor seems to underlie most of improvement recorded by the Nuffield Questionnaire.

Questions 28 and 29 asked the respondents about any written work they were required to do during their stay abroad. These objective questions are much easier to interpret: the answers suggest that only a third of students were required to do any written work by their host department while they were abroad. Respondents working as assistants were least likely to be asked to do work of this type: only 16% of these respondents replied positively to this question. Most respondents were asked to produce written work for their home department, but of those that were, 86% were asked to produce this work in English rather than in the L2 (see figure 3). The overall impression one gets from these figures is that writing in the foreign language is not a priority either for the students, their teachers at home, or for those responsible for them during their period abroad.

The data in figure 2 proabably overestimates the amount of speaking that these students do, since most "talking" involves a great deal of listening, in fact. Given that they also seem to avoid much writing, it is clear that the majority of students abroad spend relatively small amounts of time in active language production. This suggests that most of their learning must come from passive exposure to the language - listening and reading in the L2 - and we would expect to find significant improvements in these areas, even if not in the others.

Unfortunately, the Nuffield Inquiry did not collect objective measures of the students' ability to perform in their foreign language, but this lack can partly be made up from the respondents' own assessments of how the period abroad had improved their competence in the foreign language. The students were asked to rate how much they thought they had improved on a scale from 1 (=not at all) to 5(=very much). Figure 4 shows the distribution of the responses for the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). There is a clear difference here between oral skills, and skills that involve the written word. Most respondents felt that their ability to speak the language and to understand the spoken language had improved a lot: 75% of the respondents rated their improvement in the spoken language ability at 4 or 5; and 87% rated their improvement in listening skills at the same level. For reading,however, only 49% of the respondents rated their improvement this highly, and for writing skills, the number of respondents who

Figure 2

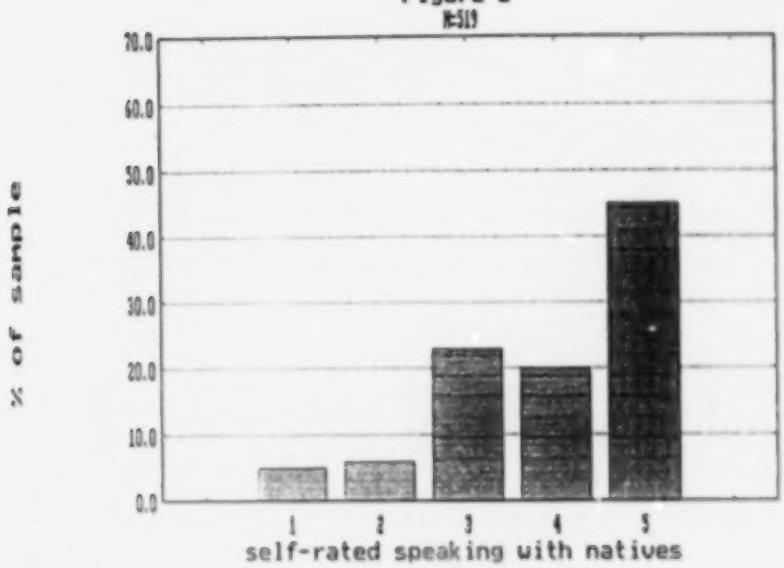
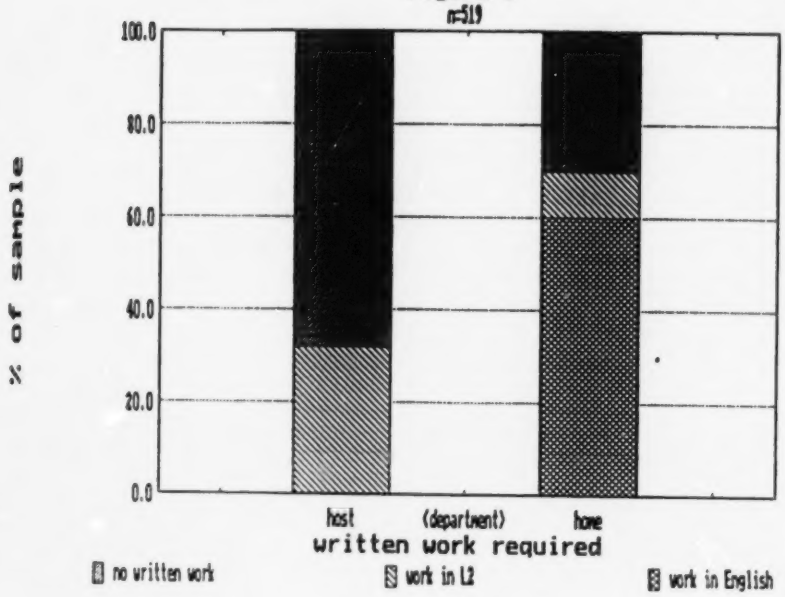

70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
1
2
3
4
5
self-rated speaking with natives

Figure 3


n=519
100.0
80.0
60.0
40.0
20.0
0.0
% of sample
host
(department)
home
written work required
no written work
work in L2
work in English

claim to have improved a lot drops to 33%. In fact, for writing, just over 30% of the respondents rate their

improvement in writing skills as low or negligible. It is possible that the respondents felt their reading and writing skills were already at a very high level, and therefore not open to improvement. This does not seem like a plausible explanation of the data for writing, though it might possibly acount for the surprisingly low scores on reading (see figs 4a-4e).

The respondents were much more confident that their knowledge of present-day culture had improved. Almost half of the respondents rated their improvement in this area as very high; only 1 respondent thought that his knowledge of this aspect had not improved at all (see figure 4f and 4g).

Figure 4f shows that almost all the respondents felt they had received some personal benefit from the experience in terms of enhanced social skills, personal maturity or self-reliance. Unfortunately, they did not perceive this experience as enhancing their chances of getting a job. This data may have been affected to some extent by the economic climate at the time the questionnaire was administered, when there was a relatively high level of graduate unemployment.

This raw data, then, suggests that the year abroad has its most signficant effects in the area of spoken language, with the majority of respondents clearly holding the view that their abilty to speak their foreign language and their passive listening skills had improved a lot. The data for reading and writing is much less clear, with large numbers of respondents failing to register an improvement in these areas. The lack of development of written skills seems to be a particularly serious problem in this group of respondents, though it echoes the self assements made by Dyson's students of French, who also registered very low levels of improvement in writing skills.

Figure 4a

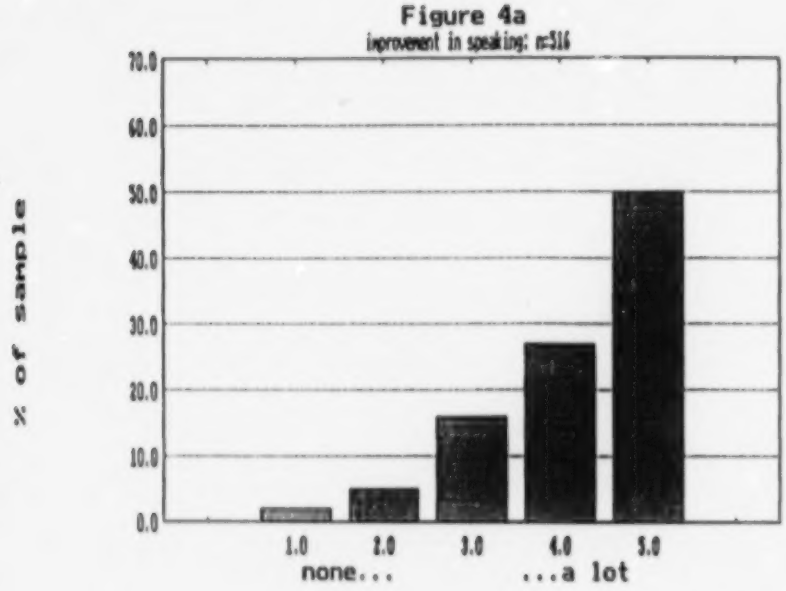

improvement in speaking: n=516
% of sample
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
1.0
2.0
3.0
4.0
5.0
none...
...a lot

Figure 4b

improvement in listening: n=316

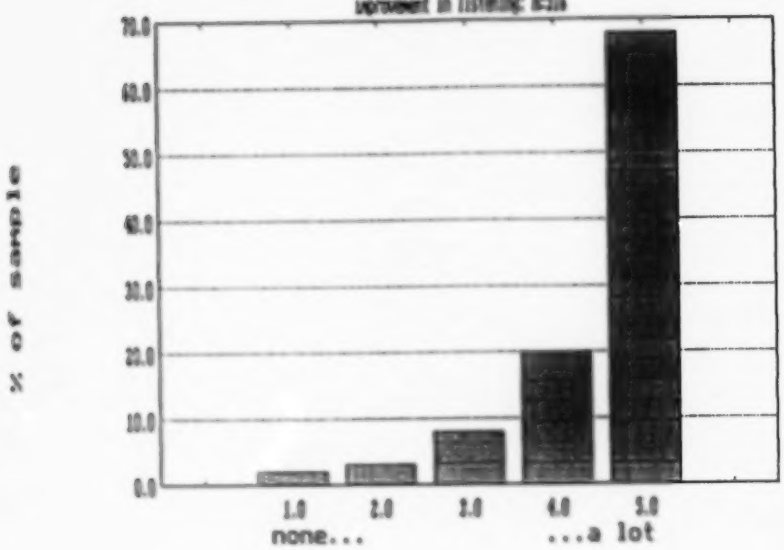


Figure 4c

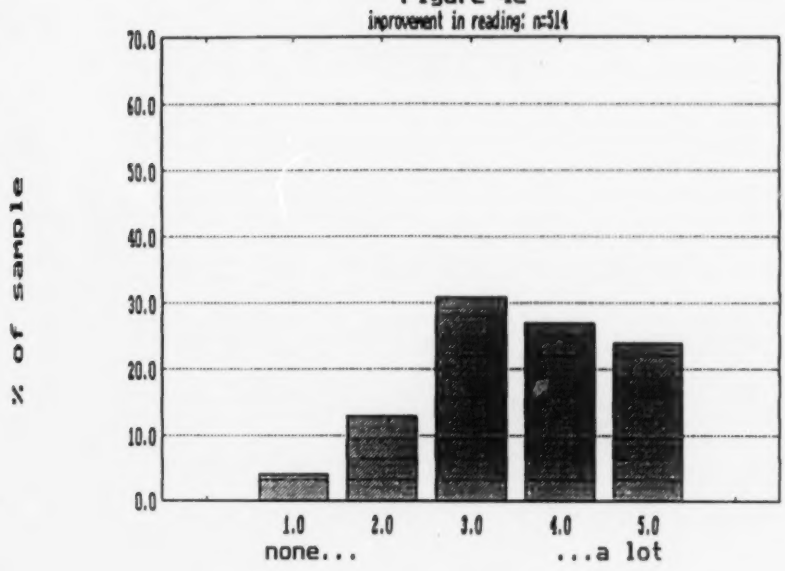

improvement in reading: n=514
% of sample
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
1.0
2.0
3.0
4.0
5.0
none...
...a lot

Figure 4d

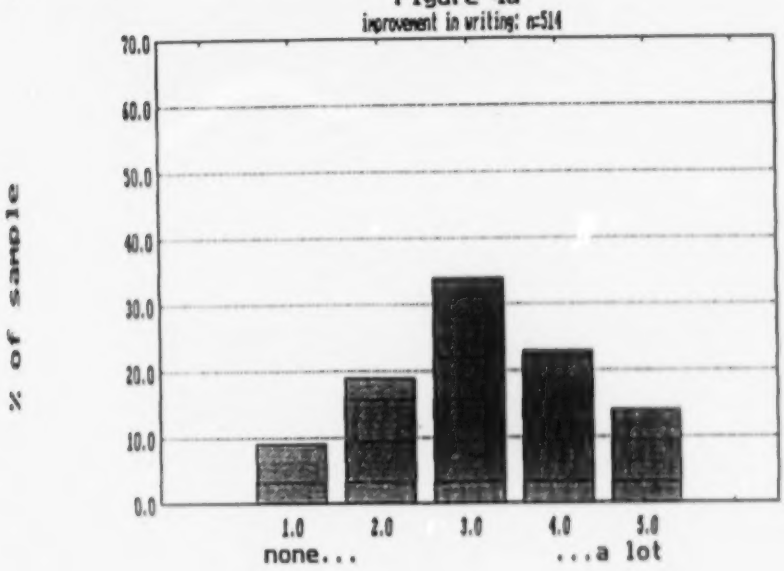

improvement in writing: n=514
% of sample
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
1.0
2.0
3.0
4.0
5.0
none...
...a lot

Figure 4e

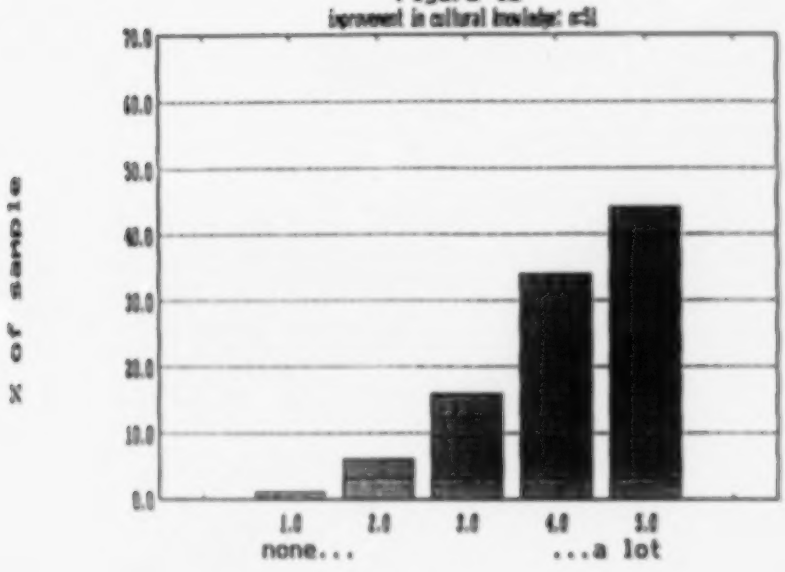


Figure 4f

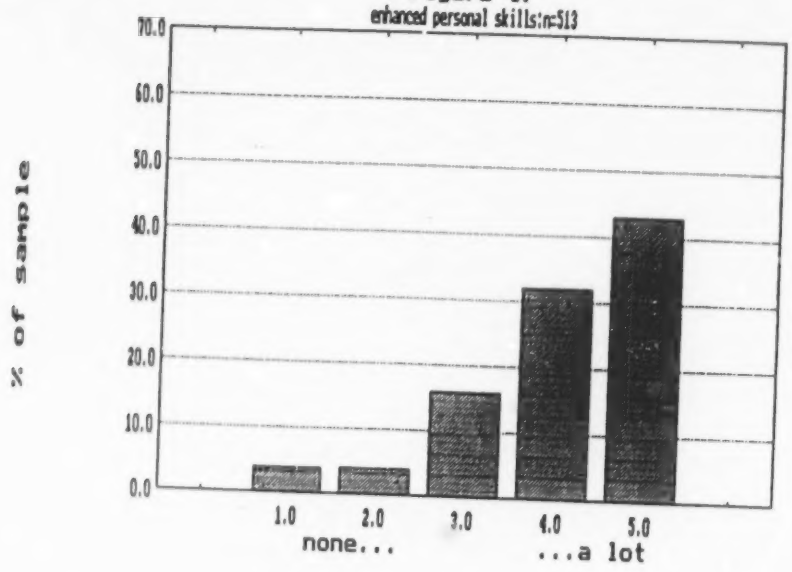

enhanced personal skills:n=513
% of sample
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
1.0
2.0
3.0
4.0
5.0
none...
...a lot

Figure 4g

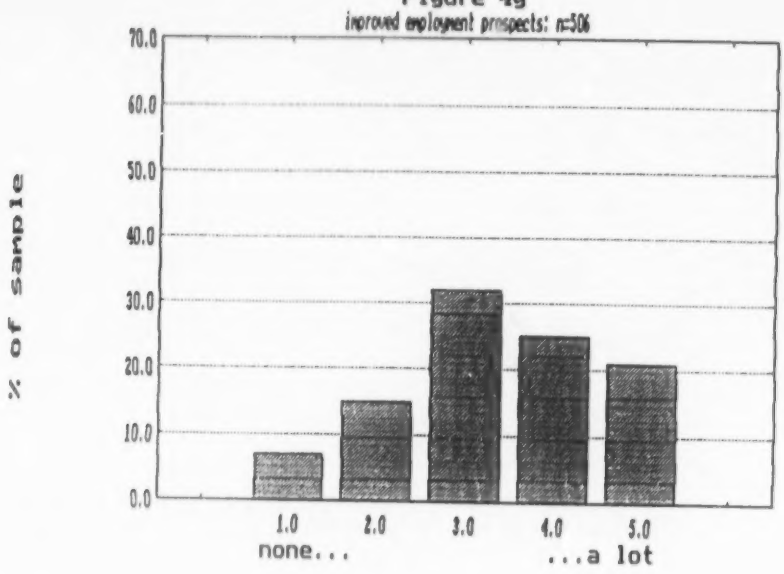

improved employment prospects: n=506
% of sample
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
1.0
2.0
3.0
4.0
5.0
none...
...a lot

Figure 5

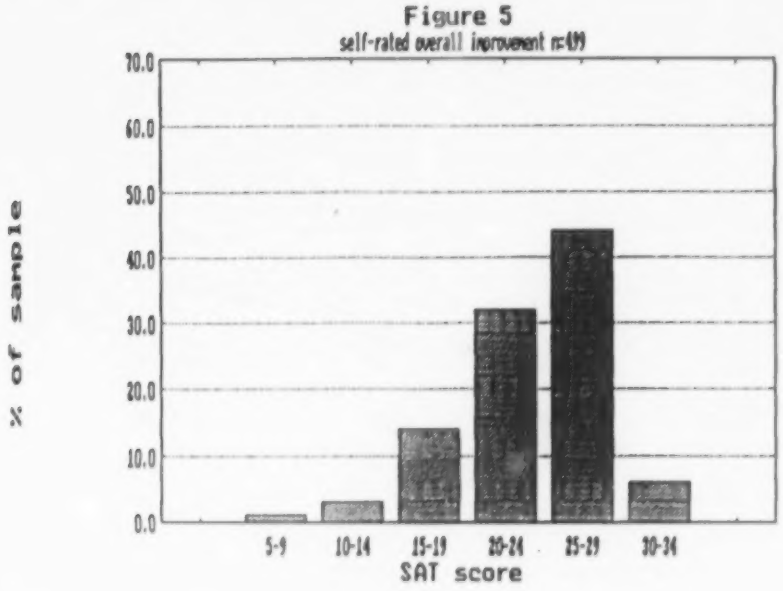
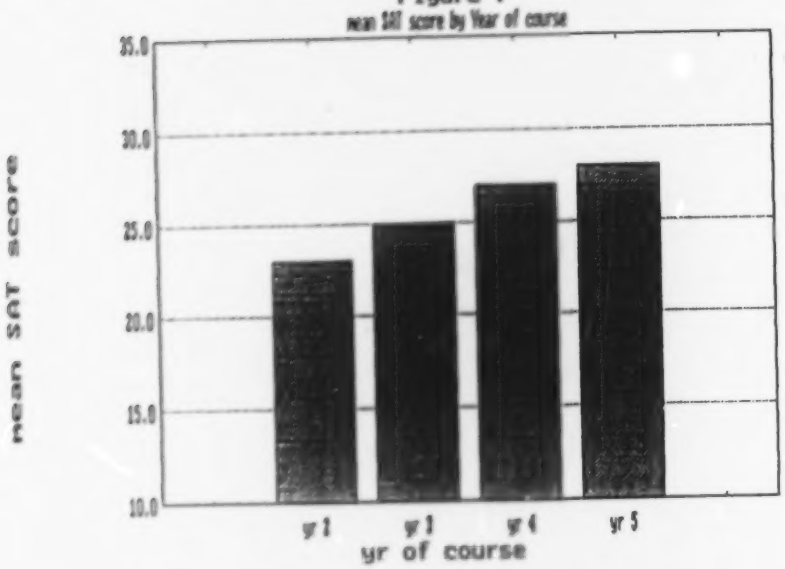

self-rated overall improvement n=439
70.0
60.0
50.0
40.0
30.0
20.0
10.0
0.0
% of sample
5-9
10-14
15-19
20-24
25-29
30-34
SAT score

Figure 7


mean SAT score by Year of course
mean SAT score
35.0
30.0
25.0
20.0
15.0
10.0
yr 2
yr 3
yr 4
yr 5
yr of course

So much for the raw, undigested data, then. There are, however, a number of further questions that can be answered when we combine the responses to the questions in rather different ways.

Figure 5 shows the resu'ts of a composite score that I have called "SATISFACTION" (SAT for short). This score is made up of the total of all the ratings that each respondent made to questions about improved language ability, cultural understanding, personal enhancement and employability. The higher the score, the more satisfied the respondent appears to be. The maximum score is 35; the minumum score is 5. Figure 5 shows that the SAT scores are generally very high: just over half the sample score 25 points or over, and only a handful of respondents score below 20 points.

It is also possible to look at the satisfaction variable in connection with other variables in the student group. We do this by dividing the whole group up into smaller groups, and looking for systematic differences between these and the Satisfaction score.

The obvious difference to start with is SEX. For those respondents who had actually been abroad, there were 202 males and 320 females. Despite obvious cliches that spring to mind, there were no significant differences between the two sexes on the SAT variable.

The second difference concerns AGE. All other things being equal, we might imagine that more mature students would find the period abroad more useful and satisfying. Unfortunately, we cannot answer this question directly with the data available, because we don't know how old the respondents were when they went abroad. However, there are some interesting differences between the year groups answering the questionnaire (Figure 7). The mean SAT scores for respondents answering their questionnaire in year 2 or year 3 of their course (predominantly year 3) was consistently lower than the SAT score for more advanced groups. It is difficult to know how seriously to take this difference: the group sizes are far from equal, and it is possible that this has affected the data. If the finding is a genuine one, then it is difficult to know how to account for it in any obvious way. As far as I am aware there are no other published studies where the effectiveness of a year abroad at different times of a University language course have been compared. In Willis' study, for example, all the subjects went abroad at the same point in their course. This makes it difficult to put this finding in its proper context. The inference is, however, that sending students abroad at different points of their course might not always produce the same results. The critical variable here might be level of proficiency at the time of the visit abroad, rather than age or year of course per se. Both Willis et al and Dyson report that less advanced students make more progress than more

Figure 8a

improvement in cultural skills

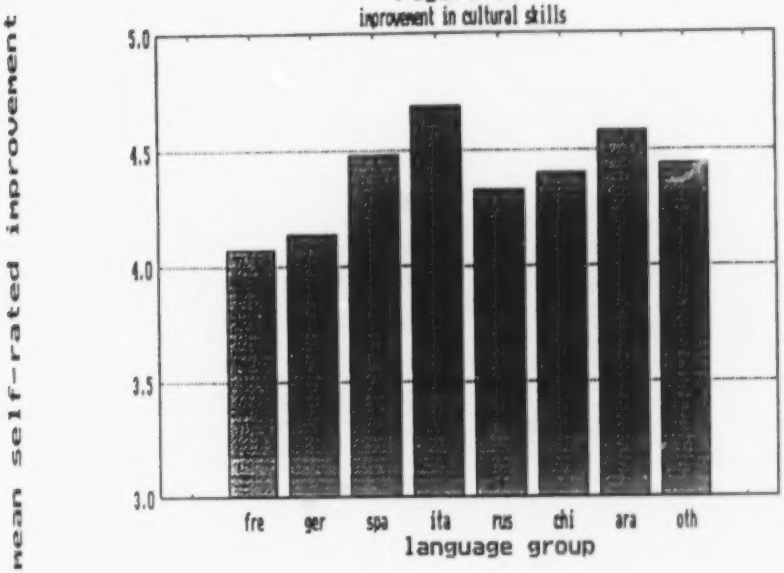


Figure 8b

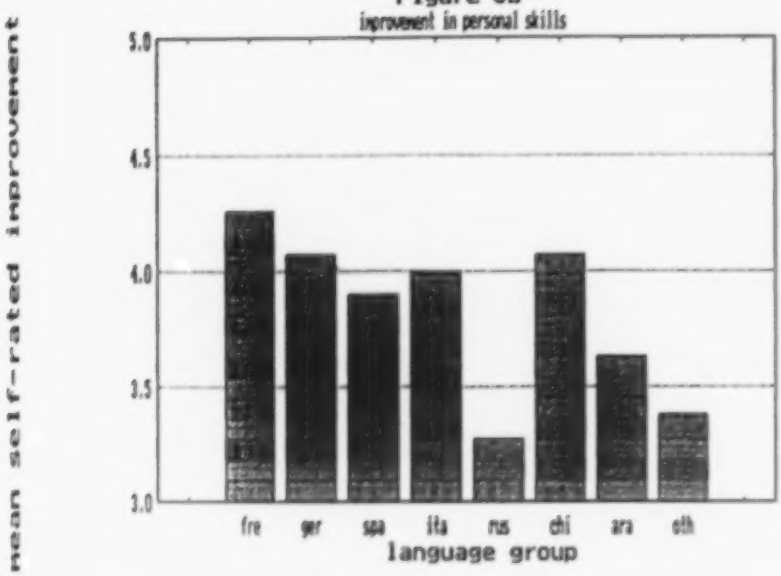

improvement in personal skills
mean self-rated improvement
5.0
4.5
4.0
3.5
3.0
fre
ger
spa
ita
rus
chi
ara
oth
language group

Figure 9a

improvement in speaking skills

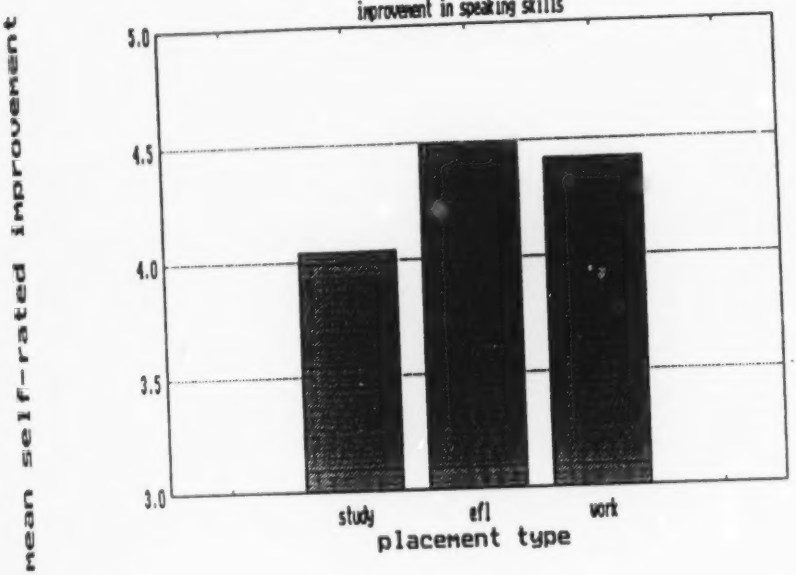


Figure 9b

improvement in listening skills

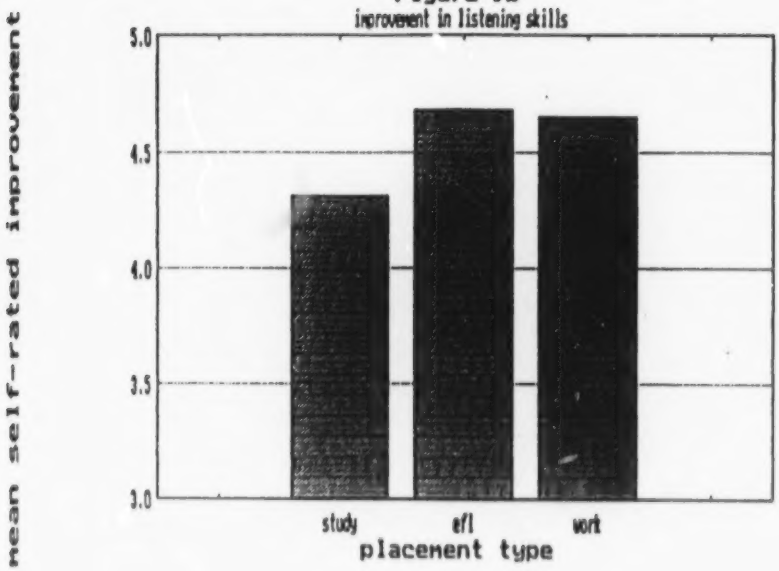
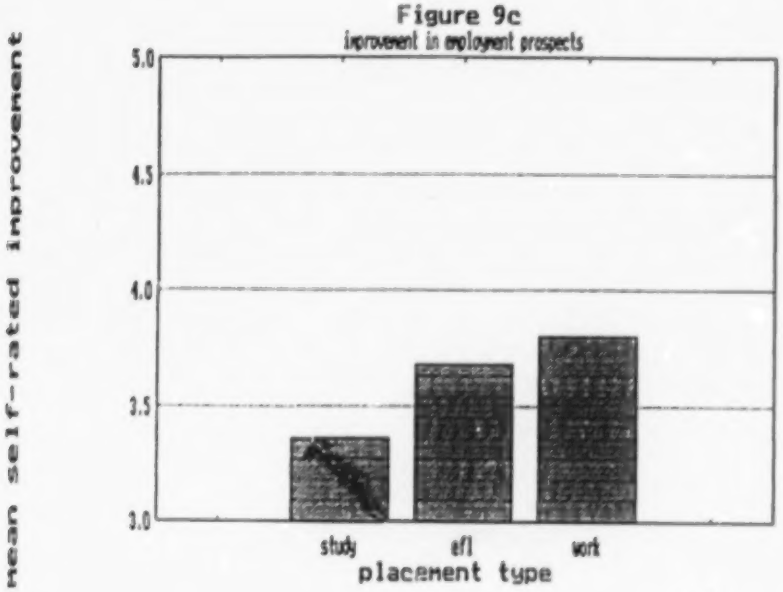


Figure 9c


improvement in employment prospects
mean self-rated improvement
5.0
4.5
4.0
3.5
3.0
study
efl
work
placement type

advanced students, and some unpublished data on vocabulary growth in exchange students suggests that this finding is NOT due to ceiling effects in the testing mechanisms (Milton and Meara: forthcoming). This is clearly a question that deserves further investigation.

A third difference concerns the language being studied. There is a widespread belief that some cultures are more friendly than others, and we might expect this to reflect on the the general satisfactoriness (or otherwise) of the experience. Again, the data offers only limited support for this view. There is no overall difference on the SAT scores between groups studying different languages. Some differences do emerge on the individual components of the self-assessment, however. Improvement in knowledge of present day culture is assessed slightly differently in the different language groups [F(7,508) 2.221, p=.031]. The differences here are fairly small, but high scores seem to be associated with less common languages (figure 8a). Enhanced personal skills produced a more marked difference in the separate language groups [F(7,508) 3.853, p=.004]. The picture here mirrors the previous data almost exactly, with low self-rating being produced by respondents studying less common languages (Fig 8b). None of the other differences reaches significance.

Much more important than the language being learned is what people did during their residence abroad. Grouping the respondents into three broad categories, students (n=301), language assistants (n=129) and other work placements (n=81), we find a significant difference in the overall SAT score for the three groups [F(2,508) 6.38, p=.002]. Respondents in study placements produced the lowest SAT scores. A detailed breakdown of these scores revealed that these differences were mainly produced by differences on the self-assessment scores for ability to speak the language, ability to understand the spoken language, and improved employment prospects. In all three cases, the scores of the respondents in study placements were considerably lower than the self-ratings of people in work-placements. The other self-assessment questions did not produce differences of note. (fig 9).

These differences seem to be broadly comparable with the data reported in Willis' study, where the effectiveness of work placements and study placements was assessed in some detail. Chapter 7 of Willis et al lists 23 main findings: 13 of these are differences between students in work-placements and students who go on study placements. They conclude (p91) that "it would seem reasonable to assert that the general pattern of findings clearly favours work-placements". The data reported here is not directly comparable with Willis' study: there is no direct assessment of language ability, for instance, and no attempt to measure improvement objectively in the present data. Nonetheless, the self-report data do suggest that work-placements produce significantly different results from study placements. This finding suggests that

the European Community's emphasis on student exchanges might not be the most effective use of public funds.

Striking as they are, the differences associated with the different types of placement are very small compared to the effects associated with one other factor: time spent talking with native speakers. Earlier, we commented that this variable is difficult to interpret because of ambiguities in the way the question is posed. Nonetheless, the answers to this question produced the largest systematic effects that we have been able to extract from this data. Students who rated themselves as spending a lot of time talking in the foreign language produced very much higher SAT scores than respondents who rated themselves badly on this variable [$F(4,510)$ 30.63, $p<.001$]. Detailed analysis of the data reveals that this relationship holds across all the self-assessment skills, though it is less marked for personal and employment skills than it is for direct language skills (see table 2).

Table 2 relationship between speaking time and self-rated improvement in other skills

	mean self rated improvement in:						
speaking	spkg	lstng	rdng	wrtng	cultr	prsnl	emplmnt
1	2.7	3.7	2.4	2.0	3.4	3.7	2.9
2	2.8	3.7	3.1	2.5	4.1	4.1	3.4
3	3.9	4.4	3.3	2.8	3.9	4.0	3.4
4	4.3	4.5	3.6	3.2	4.1	3.9	3.3
5	4.7	4.8	3.9	3.5	4.4	4.3	3.7
F(4,510)	56.9**	18.3**	16.1**	18.5**	10.7**	3.9*	3.0+

** $p<.001$ * $p<.01$ + $p<.05$

Conclusions

The data reported here has to a large extent confirmed the findings of Willis et al (1977), and presented yet more evidence that students in work placements appear to get more out of their year abroad than do students on study placements. The most solid finding is that studuents who perceive themselves as spending a lot of time speaking the language also rate themselves as improving substantially on all the scales investigated here.

There are, however, some hints in the data that the year abroad may be something of a hit-and-miss affair, with very few home departments controlling or guiding the work that students do while they are abroad. In fact, it is difficult

to avoid the impression that large numbers of students, from this sample at least, seem to have been sent abroad for long periods, and left largely to their own devices. They certainly do not seem to have been provided with an organised programme of activities or assignments designed to improve their language skills, and this apparent lack is one that really needs to be investigated much more closely. Informal reports from teachers involved in exchanges suggest that significant changes have been introduced in the way that exchange programmes are implemented, and that current practice is now very different from what it was at the time of the Nuffield survey. However, given that teachers' perceptions of course programmes are often very different from the perceptions of the people who follow them, it would be worthwhile for someone to look more closely at just what the current practice is.

In the second of these reports, it emerged that language students typically spend only a small proprotion of their study time actually working on or in the language while they are studying in the UK, and this suggests that a great deal of their linguistic development actually takes place during these extended stays abroad. This suggests that it might be worthwhile developing formal schemes of work for students to complete while they abroad. These schemes should NOT be library based projects, but they should be projects which involve students in collecting data in real situations, preferably ones which involve a great deal of face-to-face contact with native speakers. The problem, of course, is that language students are typically not trained to collect data of this sort, or to handle the results that observational studies or informal surveys produce. There might be a strong case for developing materials and self-study packs designed to teach these skills specifically to students spending a year abroad. Mike Byram and Celia Roberts have recently obtained funds from the Economic and Social Research Council to develop a course in Culture for visiting students - essentially a crash course in ethnography. This development goes some way towards filling this gap, but still leaves a lot of ground to be covered.

These findings apart, it will be obvious that we still know very little about how these periods abroad are spent, and how effective they are. The questions in the Nuffield Inquiry go some way towards what we need, but they do not really provide the kind of data which is needed if sensible policy decisions are to be made. For instance, current figures suggest that there are about 27,000 students in British universities following language courses, (Rigby and Burgess 1991:p11). This figure is likely to rise if Universities follow government suggestions to make courses in languages available to non-specialists as well. If each of these students spends a year abroad, then approximately 6000 students are in overseas placements in any one year: the equivalent of a small university. Given that the European Community is also strongly committed to promoting

large scale mobility among students, through its Erasmus and Lingua schemes, these numbers can only increase. This commitment represents a huge investment in human capital, not just for the country, but also for the individual students, who lose a year's accumulated earning power as a result of this time abroad.

It is far from clear whether government spending plans will continue to offer unquestioning support at this level of activity for very long. It is clear, however, that our current belief in the importance of a year abroad rests on some very flimsy, and largely anecdotal evidence. A proper review of the effects of residence abroad still seems to be long overdue.

References

Dyson, P. 1988. *The Year Abroad.* London: Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges.

Freed, B 1990. *Informal Language Contact and its effect on foreign language learning.* University of Pennsylvania.

Lussier, D. in press. Exploration into appropriate standardized instruments for measuring ESL performance in secondary level exchange students.

Milton, J and P Meara. forthcoming. How periods abroad affect vocabulary growth in a foreign language.

G Rigby and RG Burgess. 1991. *Language Teaching in Higher Education: a discussion document.* Coventry: Centre for Educational Appraisal and Research. University of Warwick.

F Willis, G Doble, U Sankarayya and A Smithers, 1977. *Residence Abroad and the student of modern languages: a preliminary survey.* Bradford: Modern Languages Centre.

Appendix 1: extract from the Nuffield Students' Questionnaire

PERIOD(S) ABROAD
This section asks about time during your course which you have spent abroad.

23. Since starting your course, how much time during the vacations have you spent in a country where a foreign language included in your degree course is used (excluding the year abroad)?

no time at all [1]
less than one month [2]
one to three months [3]
more than three but less than six months [4]
more than six months [5]

24. Have you spent time abroad as part of your course? [Yes] [No]

If "no", do you expect to do so? [Yes] [No]

25. Please tell us which country you visited, the language you used, how long you were there for and what (officially) you were doing - ie were you a language assistant, working in industry, as a secretary etc). If you have been to more than one country, please tell us about each.

26. Was this arranged by your department? [Yes] [No]

27. Was any specific preparation given by your department for the period abroad? For example, were you given the opportunity to talk to students who had already been where you were going? Were you given handbooks, etc? [Yes] [No]

28. Were you required to prepare any written work for an employer or educational institution other than your department while abroad? [Yes] [No]
If YES, please give details.

29. Were you required to prepare any work for your department while abroad? [Yes] [No]
If YES, was this in English or in the foreign language?
Please give details.

30. How much time did you spend speaking the language when you were abroad?

not very much		quite a lot		a great deal
1	2	3	4	5

31. Do you feel that your language skills were sufficiently developed at the time you first went abroad as part of your course for you to benefit fully from the experience? [Yes] [No]

32. Would you have liked to stay longer? [Yes] [No]

34. In what ways, if any, was the period abroad followed up on your return? (For example, debriefing meetings, writing a report about the placement?)

35. Please rate the extent to which you feel that the period abroad had each of the following effects upon your foreign language competence.

	not at all				very much
improved ability to speak the language	1	2	3	4	5
improved ability to understand the language	1	2	3	4	5
improvement in reading skills	1	2	3	4	5
improvement in writing skills	1	2	3	4	5
improved knowledge of present-day culture	1	2	3	4	5
enhanced personal maturity, self-reliance, or social skills	1	2	3	4	5
improved employment prospects	1	2	3	4	5

CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION OCCASIONAL PAPERS are a series of simply produced papers for informal circulation. Appearance in this series does not preclude subsequent publication, either in CLE Working Papers or elsewhere. Authors will welcome comments or responses from any reader.

Occasional Papers so far published:

1. An introduction to Research in Language in Education - Christopher Brumfit & Rosamond Mitchell July 1990

2. Developing the Reading Curriculum - John Taylor August 1990

3. Evaluation of First Version of the "Language, Communication and Media" Unit on the PGCE - Kamana Tshibengabo & Christopher Brumfit November 1990

4. Studying Media Audiences - Andrew Hart March 1991

5. Task-based Language Learning with Computers - Christa McCormick July 1991

6. "Playful - Aloof": Using Personal Construct Theory as a Measure of Interpersonal Affect in Native Speaker/ Non-native Speaker Conversation - Simon Williams January 1992

7. Evaluation of the Basingstoke Primary Schools Language awareness Project: 1990-91, Final Report - Rosamond Mitchell, Cynthia Martin, Mike Grenfell January 1992

8. Learner Strategies in the Secondary School Classroom - Michael Grenfell & Vee Harris May 1992

9. Ecologia: Language Students and their Lecturer in a New Learning Environment - Alison Piper September 1992

10. Languages in the University of Southampton: a Report on the Language Audit Carried out by the Director of the Language Centre in 1991 - Alison Piper September 1992

11. Models of Media Education: a Study of Secondary English Teachers Teaching Media, Part 1: Overview - Andrew Hart & Tony Benson December 1992

12. Models of Media Education: a Study of Secondary English Teachers Teaching Media, Part 2: Profiles and Lessons - Andrew Hart & Tony Benson April 1993

13. Reading and Teaching Literature - Michael Benton January 1993

14. Literature Teaching and the National Curriculum - Michael Benton October 1993

15. Reader Response Criticism in Children's Literature - Michael Benton October 1993

16. The Caen Primary School Foreign Language Learning Project - Michael Grenfell December 1993

17. The Changing Linguistic Curriculum in Europe - Martin Harris
January 1994

18. Jan Komensky - The Teacher of Nations - Eric Hawkins
January 1994

19. Final Report: "Knowledge about Language", Language Learning and the National Curriculum - Rosamond Mitchell, Janet Hooper & Christopher Brumfit January 1994

20. Constructing a Multi-Dimensional Research Study - Rohani Abdul Hamid
February 1994

21. Literacy in Contemporary English Society - Jane Talbot
May 1994

22. 'Speaking Proper': Accent, Dialect and Identity - Janet Hooper
March 1994

23. English as a Subject: Its Development over Four Centuries - Ian Michael
May 1994

24. National Identity and Language in Multi-Ethnic Latin America -
Clare Mar-Molinero June 1994

25. The Short Story - a Hybrid Form: Implications for Teaching -
Frank Myszor June 1994

26. The Use of Portable Computers with Dyslexic Students - Geraldine Price
July 1994

27. Developing an Interactive Methodology: a co-operative approach -
Cherry Edwards & Michael Grenfell August 1994

28. Politics and Change in Research in Applied Linguistics -
Ben Rampton August 1994

29. British Cultural Studies: some educational concerns - Christopher
Brumfit December 1994

30. The Self-conscious Spectator - Michael Benton December 1994

31. The Media Education Revolution - Len Masterman March 1995

32. Bilingual Learners and the National Curriculum -
Christopher Brumfit & Kathy Mason December 1994

33. Trainee Teachers' Knowledge about Language - Christopher Brumfit &
Rosamond Mitchell January 1995

34. Notes on Pre-independence Education in Tanganyika -
Philip Clarke March 1995

35. Education and the Sister Arts - Michael Benton December 1994

36. Student Attitudes to Learning Modern Languages in the 1980s -
Paul Meara March 1995

*

Available for £2.50 with post and packing.

*

Also available:

CLE Working Papers 1	107 pp	1990		) each £5.50) with post
CLE Working Papers 2	Reading	150 pp	1992	) & packing)
CLE Working Papers 3	134 pp	1994		)
CLE Working Papers 4		1995	available spring	

*

CLE Briefing Document No.1: "Standard English"
Christopher Brumfit April 1993

CLE Briefing Document No.2: "The Canon"
Michael Benton November 1993

CLE Briefing Document No.3: "Advanced Language Training for English Teachers"
Christopher Brumfit November 1993

CLE Briefing Document No.4: "Adult Language Classes available in Southampton Area"
Christopher Brumfit December 1993

CLE Briefing Document No.5: "Recent Government Reports on Language in the National Curriculum"
Christopher Brumfit January 1995 each £2.00

*

Copies are obtainable (while stocks last) from Mrs Rita Corbidge, School of Education, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ, for the cost of postage and photocopying.

*

© The Author

Paul Meara is Research Director of the Centre for Applied Language Studies, University College, Swansea, and is a former Chair of the British Association for Applied Linguistics.